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Forget the happy pop of a cork being pulled from a bottle. In Southern Ontario, oenophiles listen for the crackle of gunshots ricocheting off the Niagara Escarpment. That's the sound of "bird bangers" — blanks fired to keep birds from the vines — and the signal that new vintages are coming. Good vintages.

No, there hasn't been a "bottle shock" moment for grape growers here. But the Niagara Peninsula is attracting growing respect. Multinationals have taken stakes in Ontario wine (for example, Boisset's joint venture with Vincor-Constellation's Le Clos Jordanne). So have boldface businessmen (there are labels from Dan Aykroyd, Wayne Gretzky and Mike Weir). And in the last year at least two new wineries have joined the 75-strong community, while established names such as Inniskillin continue to reinvent themselves.

Why the Napa-like boom? Increasing support for local and sustainable products has certainly helped. But it goes deeper than that. Most experts agree that Southern Ontario has the right climate and the right soil — and now the expertise and a spare-no-expense-for-quality approach — to craft delicate, fragrant, food-friendly wines. In fact, the 2007s are already considered to be Niagara's best vintage yet.

Just in time to sample them, then, a guide to the hottest new properties, producers and must-try sips.



NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE

SOUTHBROOK VINEYARDS Bill and Marilyn Redelmeier have been producing wine for more than 15 years. But when a 30-hectare Niagara plot came onto the market — a plot partially planted with A-class Bordeaux varieties — they knew it was time to move their operations. And they moved fast. Within a few months they hired winemaker Ann Sperling and they closed the deal by the winter solstice of 2005.

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At Hidden Bench's winery on the Niagara Escarpment - nicknamed 'the barn' - grapes are hand-sorted by 40 people, then fed into presses to be crushed.

This cosmological detail was not lost on Sperling. A long-time proponent of biodynamic grape growing, where the balance between the heavens and the earth is essential, she urged the Redelmeiers to adopt a fully organic approach. The team also opened their doors to the public on June 22 of this year. Yes, right on the summer solstice.

Still, Southbrook isn't all signs and no substance. Stroll the grounds and you'll see cutting-edge sustainability at work in the form of Shetland sheep. The herd munches clover and grasses between the rows, strips leaves off vines to increase sun exposure on the fruit and drops small clumps of natural fertilizer while bringing their "energy" to the farm. Next year, the animals will even be certified organic — and local chefs are already looking forward to offering the ultimate in local food and wine pairing.

The reception centre also reflects the winery's holistic philosophy. A LEED-certified design by Jack Diamond, it includes a roof that appears to rest only on a thin edge of glass looking out over the vineyards. And speaking of the wine: Make sure to try the Triomphe series — including a stunning 2007 sauvignon blanc, and the house specialty Bordeaux blends.

Southbrook is at 581 Niagara Stone Rd. Daily tastings are \$6 to \$9 for three samples. For details, visit www.southbrook.com.

CATTAIL CREEK ESTATE WINERY Cattail Creek is another old

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vines-new wines story. The Dyck family has been farming grapes here for more than 50 years (including some of the oldest riesling vines in Ontario) and selling their harvests to local wineries. But in 2006, the family decided to try winemaking themselves. Now they sell a few hundred cases of wine — all made in a functional barn-like structure behind the tasting room, and some matured in oak barrels in a small cellar beneath it. Simple but impressive. The highlights include the Riesling Reserve and the 2007 Cabernet Franc Icewine, a rare and unusual treat. *Cattail Creek is on R.R. #4, 1156 Concession 6. There are fee daily tastings on featured wines. For details, visit www.cattailcreek.ca.*

INNISKILLIN WINES Inniskillin is an Ontario wine pioneer. The owners actually picked up the first winery licence issued in the province since Prohibition. But that doesn't mean they're behind the times. This year, they've given their original home, the quaint Brae Burn Barn and Founders' Hall, a significant face-lift that includes cathedral ceilings, an open demo kitchen and a separate "Riedel room" for sips from the Austrian company's specialized wine glasses. The company has also brought Ontario winemaker Bruce Nicholson back from its Okanagan Valley operation. His Montague Vineyard series highlights the potential of Niagara-on-the-Lake wines.

Inniskillin is at 1499 Line 3. Daily tours are \$5 a person. For details, visit www.inniskillin.com.

THE NIAGARA ESCARPMENT

ROSEWOOD ESTATES WINERY & MEADERY When this 16-hectare estate opened in May, it quickly sold most of its inaugural 2006 vintages. And the release of Rosewood's 2007 pinot noir and pinot noir reserve are hotly anticipated. But the draw here isn't just grapes. It's a far more ancient cocktail: mead.

That's because owner Eugene Roman's first love is bees. A second generation beekeeper, he got his first hive at age 6 and now has six apiaries in Beamsville where bees feed on wildflowers, clover and orchards. The honey is then transformed into a pale golden mead that is vintage dated — all the honey is collected within the same calendar year, and each displays differing characteristics — and tastes nothing short of amazing.

Three styles are on offer. These range from the nearly dry Harvest Gold to the sweet and rich Ambrosia. In the middle is Mon Cherie, a blend of Niagara cherry juice and mead.

Rosewood is at 4352 Mountain View Rd. Free tastings are on offer daily. For details, visit www.rosewoodwine.com

HIDDEN BENCH VINEYARDS AND WINERY To get a taste of Hidden Bench you'll have to go to the source. When the winery opened last June, it won immediate acclaim for its 2005 vintage. Then it picked up a shiny wine of the year award for the semillon-sauvignon blanc blend called Nuit Blanche. But despite its cult status, the wines here are distributed only to club members and the province's top sommeliers.

Why the tight controls? Owner Harald Thiel is after the ultimate expression of terroir. His estate is shrewdly located on three of the best vineyard sites along the Niagara Escarpment. Locust Lane surrounds the winery itself, while Rosomel and Felseck are situated nearby along the Beamsville Bench. These are the names that you will see on the estate's top wines, single vineyard selections that are made only in top years. In years deemed less suitable, parcels are blended to create an often overachieving estate-bottled wine.

Hidden Bench has also recruited winemaker Jean-Martin Bouchard, who has worked in Australia, France and Germany and has an intuitive sense of when to step in and when to let the wine follow its own course of evolution. The result: Both the reds and the whites here possess an uncommon richness and ripeness that is rare in the Niagara Peninsula. In addition to powerful pinot and chardonnay, the red Bordeaux blend called La Brunante is perhaps the finest in Canada.

Hidden Bench is at 4152 Locust Lane. Tastings (\$10 for three) are on weekends. For details, visit www.hiddenbench.com.

TAWSE WINERY Morey Tawse opened his 30-hectare winery to the public in 2005. But it's only recently that his patience has paid off: The wines here are now counted among Canada's best — and ongoing experiments with organic and biodynamic viticulture promise even better results to come.

The gentle transformation of the grapes is conducted in a stunning six-level winery that is both energy-efficient and environmentally friendly. Using the natural slope of the Niagara Escarpment, grapes move from the reception room at the top of the winery to the bottling line at the bottom without the harsh action of a pump. Heating and cooling are achieved with a geothermal energy system rather than power from the grid. Wines are matured in naturally controlled underground barrel cellars.

Recent vintages are refined and silky. And the 2007 pinot noirs from different parcels are worthy of comparison with anything the world has to offer. *Tawse is at 3955 Cherry Ave. Daily tastings are \$2 or \$5 for three samples. For details, visit www.tawsewinery.ca.*

John Szabo is Canada's only master sommelier. To read his tasting notes on Niagara wines, visit www.wineaccess.ca/blogs/jszabo.