

# His cup runneth over

After a false start, Ontario's Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery put itself on the map with a strong showing at the 2007 Canadian Wine Awards. On the way to raising Hidden Bench's profile, owner Harald Thiel made a couple of smart acquisitions

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- [Hidden Bench](#)

### The vitals

Hidden Bench began with three employees, including owner Harald Thiel, who now has six full-time and 15 part-time staff helping him produce seven types of wine. Before it won big at the 2007 Canadian Wine Awards, Hidden Bench had two vineyards. Mr. Thiel has since purchased a third. And about 20 fine-dining restaurants, including Toronto hot spots Canoe and Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar, now have Hidden Bench on their wine lists – up from just three before the awards.

### The market

Canadians spent more than \$5-billion on wine in the 2006-07 season, but only about 30 per

cent when Harald Thiel sold his stake in AVW-TELAV, an audiovisual services company he had run for 23 years, he knew just what to do with the cash from the seven-figure deal: start his own winery.

Mr. Thiel, 50, isn't the first guy to make a second career out of producing wine. But he had no plans to let that turn him into a hobbyist. "I wanted to produce ultrapremium wines that are reflective of the terroir," the Montreal native says.

Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery, on the Niagara Escarpment's Beamsville Bench, began in 2003 with a single 28-acre vineyard and high hopes. Mr. Thiel invested in top-of-the-line equipment and implemented rigorous procedures such as picking and sorting all the grapes by hand, something many wineries don't do.

But when he finally got a taste of his 2004 vintages in 2005, he knew they weren't good enough. Rather than bottle the wine under the Hidden Bench name, Mr. Thiel made what he calls a "big economic decision" and sold it in bulk.

Fortunately, that inauspicious start wasn't a sign of things to come. In 2007, Hidden Bench saw its 2005 vintages place in five categories and win two gold medals at the Canadian Wine Awards. It also came in second as winery of the year, after industry leader Mission Hill Family Estate. But the real clincher was taking best white wine for its Nuit Blanche, a combination of sauvignon blanc and Sémillon that

cent of that went to homegrown wineries. Three-quarters of all red wines sold in Canada were imports, compared with about 60 per cent of whites. The LCBO, where Hidden Bench wines are sold, moves twice as much import wine as domestic. National wine consumption has climbed steadily during the past decade. In 2007, Canadians aged 15 and older drank 14.6 litres per person, an increase of almost 46 per cent from 1998.

### The key decisions

Mr. Thiel set the stage for Hidden Bench's success by purchasing the Rosomel Vineyard in 2004 and hiring wine maker Jean-Martin Bouchard. "The Rosomel Vineyard is unique and special," he says of the land that produced the grapes for Hidden Bench's award-winning Nuit Blanche. "And [Mr. Bouchard's] abilities expressed the best from that vineyard."

### The oversight

Unsure how his wines would fare, Mr. Thiel sold half of his fruit to another winery in 2005. "I wish I had not done that," he says. "If you put a good plan together and you put all the components in place, you have to believe your product is going to do well."

### The intriguing idea

After the Canadian Wine Awards, Nuit Blanche was in such high demand that Mr. Thiel had to put it on allocation, which means he imposed a purchase limit of three bottles per customer at the winery. That's a real sign of success, he says, "because only tremendous wines get put on allocation."

### The next steps

With Hidden Bench currently producing 4,500 cases of wine a year, Mr. Thiel hopes to reach 8,000 and leave it at that. "We want to be a quality-focused winery," he says. There are

goes for \$40 a bottle. "We have gotten very good market acceptance because of how well we did at these awards," says Mr. Thiel, who has an MBA from the European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD).

That's putting it mildly. Mr. Thiel estimates that Hidden Bench, which retails only in Ontario, sold 150 per cent more wine in the month after the winners were announced than in any other. There was also a flurry of media attention, including coverage in Wine Access magazine, which owns the Canadian Wine Awards. Wine Access described Nuit Blanche as "[a] dazzling barrel-fermented blend which outclasses many of the top Bordeaux from which it draws inspiration."

But most important, Hidden Bench's impressive showing transformed it from an unknown winery into one that serious wine drinkers and industry insiders had heard of — and wanted to try. "Suddenly, everyone was saying, 'Have you tried Hidden Bench?'" Mr. Thiel recalls. "When you get a third-party validation of your product, wine consumers are affected by that."

It's tempting to chalk up the whole thing to a stroke of luck — judging wine is entirely subjective, after all. But if Mr. Thiel hadn't made some key decisions, starting with the purchase of a second vineyard, Rosomel, in 2004, Hidden Bench might still be an obscure name in the Canadian wine world. The 30-year-old vines at Rosomel Vineyard, about six kilometres from his first, have consistently produced outstanding grapes, Mr. Thiel says. And he had his eye on the property from Day 1.

But getting his hands on that vineyard, which had been worked by the same farmer for three decades, wasn't so easy. "He had a tremendous attachment to the land," Mr. Thiel says of Roman Prydatkewycz. Convincing Mr. Prydatkewycz to sell to Hidden Bench took eight months. In the end, Mr. Thiel kept him on as vineyard manager. Another pivotal decision was the choice of wine maker. "You're making a long-term commitment to someone and giving up a good chunk of the creative process," Mr. Thiel says.

But instead of going after a high-profile talent, he sought out someone who shared his vision of uncompromising quality. Mr. Thiel found that in Jean-Martin Bouchard, who had been quietly working as assistant wine maker at Sumac Ridge Estate Winery in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. Mr. Bouchard became Hidden Bench's primary wine maker in 2005. "A lot of people go out and hire a big-name wine maker to add credibility to their wine, but for me, it was [his] skills and attitude," Mr. Thiel says.

In fact, it was Mr. Bouchard who suggested that Hidden Bench enter the Canadian Wine Awards. "He thought it would be a good way to benchmark our wines against others in the industry," Mr. Thiel says.

It's a good thing that Mr. Thiel took this advice. Besides generating buzz, the awards pushed him to purchase a third vineyard. But perhaps the biggest thing they did for Mr. Thiel was boost his confidence. "I think a lot of people assumed, 'Here's another second-career entrepreneur trying to acquire his way into the wine business,'" he says. "But this confirmed that we were making all the right decisions all along."

### • Connect with Harald Thiel

plans to begin selling in Quebec in 2009, with the rest of the country – and international points – to follow.



Harald Thiel will join us for an online discussion Friday at 1 p.m. ET. To ask Mr. Thiel about starting a winery and Hidden Bench's experience at the Canadian Wine Awards, [click here](#).

#### • **Expert insight**

"Nuit Blanche, especially because it came from an unknown winery and had an intriguing name, suddenly became a must-try wine for lots of sommeliers and wine writers," says The Globe and Mail's wine writer, Beppi Crosariol. [Click here](#) for more and to pose your own question to Mr. Crosariol.