

Niagara College winery's vintages are palate pleasers

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The wine world is populated with Niagara College Teaching Winery grads.

Steve Gill rattles off the names of his young protégés who have gone on to illustrious careers in a wide spectrum of wine jobs, all nurtured in the hands-on wine program.

Gill, manager of the wine and viticulture program, is darn proud of the more than 1,000 grads who have gone on to become winemakers, marketers, retailers, sommeliers, viticulturists and pretty much anything to do with growing, making or selling wine. It's a program that had humble beginnings in 2000 and is set to take on a whole new dimension this fall with the opening of the brand new Wine Education Centre.

The centre, which is being built adjacent to the Niagara-on-the-Lake campus, overlooking the college's 40 acres of vineyards, will boast 7,500 square feet of space for tasting counters, a retail store, interactive displays promoting the entire Niagara wine region and a working winery complete with state-of-the-art production lab, viticulture and oenology labs, barrel room and wine library.

It is an elegant building that looks perfectly at home in the college's vineyards and will finally consolidate the teaching winery's facilities, now spread out over four locations on campus.

For Gill, it's the ideal evolution for Canada's only teaching winery and the perfect environment to shepherd the next wave of wide-eyed students. Not to mention the wines that are crafted there under the careful eye of winemaker (and educator) Terrence Van Rooyen. The self-sufficient, lucrative retail wine business is at the centre of the college's wine program. All the wines are made on site using a 50-50 combination of purchased and estate grapes. And the wines have been turning heads since the program began. Here are some that can be highly recommended from a recent tasting (all available at the campus retail store).

NCT College Red 2008(\$11,) -- This is the most basic entry level wine made at the college and, not surprisingly, the biggest seller by far. What's not to like about this easy going blend of Cabernet Franc and Baco Noir? It's all about fresh berry fruit with soft mouth feel. At \$11, this campus staple deserves mention.

NCT Riesling 2007(\$12, 1/2) -- A nice little Riesling with peach, melon and some citrus on the nose. It's an off-dry style but only slightly, with green apple and grapefruit flavours on the palate.

NCT Barrel Fermented Chardonnay 2007(\$19, also at Vintages,) -- This is a nice, elegant Chardonnay with gorgeous notes of ripe pear and apple with just a kiss of butterscotch on the nose. It shows excellent balance in the mouth with creamy fruits, vanilla and toast. Yummy.

NCT Dean's List Chardonnay 2007(\$28,) -- The Dean's List tier is the super-premium level for Niagara College wines. This is a creamier version of the above with a bit more spice to go with peach and tropical fruit notes. Wonderful mouth feel.

NCT Pinot Noir 2006(\$16, 1/2) -- While Chardonnay is the star on the white side, Pinot is the king on the red side. This 2006 is drinking perfectly now, with black cherry and cedar notes on the nose followed on the palate by plums, cherries and soft, silky tannins.

NCT Dean's List Pinot Noir 2007(\$33, 1/2) -- The good news is there's lots of this top cuvee Pinot. The bad news? The 2007 crop was so good, all the grapes went into the Dean's List, with nothing left over for the regular bottling. So splurge a bit. Nice cherry-raspberry notes on the nose but really shows the beauty of the vintage in the mouth. Red fruits combined with plums and subtle earthy notes that all lead to a long finish. Very tasty.

Enjoy!

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WHAT: Niagara College Teaching Winery.

WHERE: 135 Taylor Rd., Niagara-on-the- Lake

TASTINGS AND WINE SHOP: 11 a. m. to 5 p. m. Sunday to Thursday, 11 a. m. to 8 p. m. Friday and Saturday (tours by appointment)

WINEMAKER: Terrence Van Rooyen SPECIALTIES: All the wines from this college are surprisingly delicious. Of note are the Chardonnays and the Pinot Noirs. For a real treat step up to the Dean's List tier of wines. Expensive, but it all goes to the education of budding wineophiles.

MUST TRY: The hottest wine at NCT is (not surprisingly) the College Red 2008. At \$11, it's a bargain that even students can afford. Also try the "old school" old label NCT Meritage 2005, it's a beauty.

AVAILABILITY: Winery, LCBO. WEBSITE: www.nctwinery.ca

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