

Niagara College Teaching Winery turns out tomorrow's award-winning winemakers

by Paul Benedetti

Jon Ogryzlo is flipping through the *Official Guide to the Wineries of Ontario*, excitedly calling out names.

"He's one of ours. So is she. Him, too," he says, pointing to the photos of young people working at the province's wineries. In all, Ogryzlo points to seven graduates of the Winery and Viticulture Program at Niagara College featured in 2008's wine country brochure. He smiles. "It's really nice. That is what we are all about."



Ogryzlo is proud of the success of the Winery and Viticulture Program. In all, he says, the school has graduates in almost 40 different wineries in Ontario and across the country. In 2007, Tim Reilly, a recent graduate of the program, was named winemaker at Colio Estates Winery, working alongside Carlo Negri. "We have some unbelievable students," says Ogryzlo, who is Dean of the Environment, Horticulture and Agribusiness Division at the college.

The college also offers some unbelievable wines. The Niagara College Teaching Winery (NCT Winery) has a record of producing award-winning wines that would be the envy of any major commercial winery in Canada. In 2007, the NCT 2005 Meritage won Best of Category at the All Canadian Wine Championships. In 2006, the Warren Classic Chardonnay took the gold medal in the *Wine Access* Canadian Wine Awards. In all, says Ogryzlo, NCT has garnered almost 60 medals for its wines. Not bad for an operation that produces approximately 5,000 cases and uses students to help make the wine.

"To us, all the competitions are really important. First of all, we are a winery and we are a teaching winery," says Ogryzlo. "We always think that our awards are industry awards. We are really the industry's winery."

Ogryzlo realizes having a student winery outshine the big players on the Canadian wine scene could be, well, embarrassing for some people, so he's quick to play down any sense of rivalry. The college is a team player, he says, a member of the Wine Council of Ontario, a member of the Grape Growers of Ontario and a big supporter of the industry.

"We feel that we spend so much energy promoting VQA and Niagara, and Ontario and the wines, that we are a real asset to the industry," Ogryzlo explains. "Anytime that we are seen as competitive, that's overshadowed by the great work we do for the industry."



Niagara College's program, located at the Glendale Campus just off the QEW in Niagara-on-the-Lake, is unique in Canada because it runs the first and only commercial teaching winery in the country. Nearby, Brock University has a pilot winery as part of its four-year undergraduate science degree in Oenology and Viticulture, but it does not produce wines for sale. The Teaching Winery, though,

launched in November 2002, is an actual licensed winery. The 18 different varietals and blends it produces are sold at the campus retail outlet and in LCBO stores in Ontario.

"The winery is set up as what we call a 'learning enterprise.' It is self-sufficient, so it is not subsidized by the college or anyone else," explains Ogryzlo. "It pays for itself. We have a business plan and we have to produce enough wine to run it."

Though the wine program began in 2000, the teaching winery did not open until 2002. "We started without the teaching winery," says Ogryzlo. "We had our 24 students run out to the wineries during harvest or crushing. It didn't work. It did not teach people how to work in a winery."

The program needed its own facility, so college officials travelled to California, South Carolina and Australia to see what other schools were doing. Finally, a small operation opened in the horticulture storage barn on the Niagara College campus. Today, that barn is filled with stainless steel tanks, racks of expensive oak

barrels and the sweet, ripe smell of grapes. It's a small operation, but it works well for the 35 students the program now accepts each year.

Just ask Ben Serpa, a second-year student in the two-year Winery and Viticulture Technician Program, who is coming in for his shift in work clothes and high rubber boots. He's doing his work term at the NCT Winery and has been hired to work several extra months during the busiest time of the year: harvest.

"The strength of the course is that it's very hands-on," says Serpa, 20, who grew up in Hamilton. "You are forced to do absolutely everything. It's really important to get this practical experience." He hopes to take his hard-earned skills to Portugal, where his grandfather owns a small vineyard on the island of Pico in the Azores. "I think I have found what I want to do."

That kind of enthusiasm doesn't surprise Terence van Rooyen, the college's head winemaker and a professor of applied oenology. "It's all about passion and enthusiasm and interest," says van Rooyen, who joined the college as a full-time faculty member last year, taking over master winemaking duties from Jim Warren. Van Rooyen's Masters degree in Oenology and his background in the wine industry at KVV Cellars in South Africa and as an associate professor at the University of Stellenbosch made him a perfect choice for the job.

"My philosophy is that we need to make the best possible wine we can to be able to demonstrate to the students what it takes to make an award-winning wine," says the 55-year-old winemaker, who has spent more than three decades in the business. "We don't want to teach them to make mediocre wines. They don't only see the run-of-the-mill of the operation. They need to see that it takes extra TLC to make that high-end wine."

And students will soon see an even higher-end operation, says Steve Gill, manager of the Wine and Viticulture division and the man who oversees the operation of NCT Winery. He's excited about the brand-new, \$300,000, 40-person tasting lab in the school. The lab is also key to the Certified Sommelier program and the Wine Business Management graduate program offered at the college.

"We are very proud of this," he says, walking through the state-of-the-art lab. "It is a huge investment, but we are the largest educators and promoters of VQA wines, and wine in general, in Canada."

Even more exciting, says Gill, a former Hillebrand Estate Winery employee, are the plans for the new teaching winery, which began construction in 2008. Gill says the \$1.5-million facility will sit in the middle of the vineyards that surround the campus buildings. Gill says he hopes the new winery, which will house a wine discovery centre, a retail area and more teaching and research space, will be complete by the spring of 2009. "It's all challenging, but very, very rewarding," he says.

For student Karen Vickery, the journey from Ste. Anne de Bellevue near Montreal to Niagara-on-the-Lake has been more than rewarding; it's been a revelation. The 27 year-old says working in the winery changed her life.

"For me, it was the key part. I spent a lot of time out in our little winery just getting my hands dirty," she says. "It felt great ... I remember one night last year where it was cold and rainy and we were hosing everything down and I was soaking wet and I still wanted to come back the next day, and that's when I thought, yes, this is what I want to do."

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"Top of Their Class: Niagara College Teaching Winery turns out tomorrow's award-winning winemakers" can be found in the August/September issue of *Wine Access* magazine.