

The Standard

Niagara Uncorked: Big luxurious wines get better still

Vineland Research Station steps up to improve appassimento process

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*Rennie Assemblage a big, robust red using the appassimento style. -
Bob Tymczyszyn, Torstar*

This column is for those of us who like the big, juicy reds from Italy known as Amarone.

They are often prized for special occasions, to be paired with a thick steak (done preferably rare to medium rare) or braised short ribs.

Fortunately, there are several local wineries such as Big Head, Foreign Affair and Rennie amongst others which have taken this age-old Italian method called appassimento to create some truly remarkable wines from this cooler climate.

But they are pricey, partly because the grapes are dried before crushing, resulting in higher sugars, deeper flavours and, most often, higher alcohol.

Like icewines, there is less juice that comes from the fruit and thereby increases the final costs of these wines.

And unlike "Ripasso" wines that are made by re-passing the juice over the skins of grapes that were used in the making of the Amarone, what you're getting here is the best from the first crush.

But winemakers were concerned by the amount of loss they were experiencing.

Coming to the aid of Ontario winemakers was the staff at the Vineland Research Station.

"The whole story started with some of the local winemakers rigging up their own systems and trying things out, but when they were losing 25 per cent, maybe more, that starts to become a problem," explained Darren Ward, manager of business planning and commercialization at Vineland Research.

"They approached us, so that's when the experiment started."

The scientists found that using readily available smart crates, used in many stores, worked best with the number of holes for air penetration, and they were able to fill more fruit into the crates to the point where they were not crushing.

Using baffles, they were able to channel the air.

"What this gives you is the ability to get that very consistent airflow," said Ward.

"And it takes about four times less space, although it takes about the same amount of time."

After a few prototypes, Vineland Research was able to produce and sell first units to some local wineries, one of which was Rennie Estate that is run out of Malivoire in Beamsville.

Malivoire winemaker Shiraz Mottiar said they do not use the method in their wines since they focus on more delicate styles and grape varieties, but it is a good fit for the wine produced by Graham Rennie.

"It could be a tool if we wanted to use it but because of the varieties and styles that we've embraced to work with our fruit, but with Graham's fruit and the style that

he's after it makes a lot of sense. It amplifies the wines in a big way, both in body and in roundness and fruit, you're obviously pushing the alcohols up, and you get into 15-16 alcohol."

"For the Rennie wine project, it really fits, it's all the Bordeaux wine varieties, getting that weight behind those wines really works. We're doing Gamay that's acidity and freshness and low alcohol, but here you can really see the impact."

"This is the style that Graham was really after — big, explosive style. There's a lot of oak to support it, but at the same time it's very much an expression of his vineyard because it's all from only one vineyard on the Beamsville Bench."

"It is a very traditional process, it's been around for however long whether it was because you want more alcohol in your wine or more body, this is an excellent way to do it," said Mottiar. "In a way, it extracts flavours you normally wouldn't see."

"This is not a process to salvage poorly managed grapes; this is a way to enhance really well farmed to enhance even more," he added. "It's too costly of a process to make mediocre wine."

"The drying is very consistent through the lot. The hotter the fruit, the faster the drying process will be, but we believe that prolonging will enhance flavours you didn't know were there."

It's more technical than putting it in a barn and letting the natural air flow come through, "which is a very nice process as well," said Mottiar.

Having the control assures that the drying is consistent, and the flavours are consistent. From the outside, the unit, which can hold about seven tonnes of fruit, looks like a small container box.

"The fruit goes in, and we lock the doors, essentially," said Mottiar.

What comes out at the end truly is nectar.

And Rennie's Assemblage is an excellent example, robust, thick, this is a big wine.

Brooding, luxurious in the glass the wine gives off plum. Tannins are giving way to a smoothness perpetuated by flavours of black cherry and dark fruit. A bit of warmth trails from the higher alcohol content.

This wine is mouth-filling and oh so enjoyable and available from the tasting room at Malivoire.

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