

Grape crusaders

Hard work by those in the industry is bringing unprecedented acclaim to Nova Scotia wine

Story and photos by Rob Antle

When Jean-Benoit Deslauriers speaks of the terroir that makes this part of Nova Scotia special, he sounds like an alchemist discussing a particularly magical transformation. And why not? The Gaspereau Valley soil and climate have produced sparkling wines recently compared to the very best Champagne has to offer. Rare earth to liquid gold.

“The idea is for the wines to speak for themselves,” says Deslauriers, the winemaker for Benjamin Bridge, the boutique winery that is generating buzz and setting palates a-tingle far beyond the province’s borders. “It won’t be about us, per se. It will be about Nova Scotia, and about the terroir that we were able to transparently convey.”

Benjamin Bridge has been at the vanguard of a growth and renaissance period for the Nova Scotia wine industry. Its flagship white, Nova 7 — compared to “sex in a glass” by one particularly smitten Toronto critic — is the first wine from Nova Scotia ever sold in Ontario liquor stores (a limited run of 55 cases that were quickly snapped up last summer). But Benjamin Bridge’s true *raison d’être* is its Brut Reserve sparkling wines, which garnered rave reviews in no less an Upper Canadian bastion than the Globe and Mail (see related sidebar, page 30.)

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Benjamin Bridge winemaker Jean-Benoit Deslauriers (left) — pictured with general manager Devon McConnell-Gordon — says working at the Nova Scotia winery is “one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities ... I kind of pinch myself every day.”





Muir Murray Estate Winery is located on 20 acres of vineyards, just three kilometres from downtown Wolfville.



Gaspereau Vineyards was once the site of an apple orchard. Today, there are 35 acres of vineyards at the site. They were planted in 1996.

Benjamin Bridge is a success story a decade in the making. “It was truly an experiment,” says Devon McConnell-Gordon, the winery’s general manager. Her parents — Nova Scotia mining executive Gerry McConnell and the late lawyer and businesswoman Dara Gordon — began working on the project around the turn of the millennium. They wanted to not just do it, she says, but do it right. That meant bringing in top level consultants, who determined that not all varietals were suitable for the climate, but pinpointed which ones could be done at a world-class level. At the top of that list were sparkling wines.

Deslauriers came onboard in 2008. He is from Quebec, but was toiling in the vineyards of California before being lured back east. “I knew that the Canadian wine industry was definitely on the rise, so I had an interest in coming back,” he says. Deslauriers acknowledges he didn’t know much about the industry in Nova Scotia, but it didn’t take him long to realize it was “a really special project” underway in the Gaspereau Valley.

“And it’s probably the best decision I’ve ever taken,” he says. “It’s very, very rare for a winemaker to have the opportunity to tap into a huge amount of resources, to encourage, stimulate and create quality products.”

To date, roughly \$4.5 million has been poured into building Benjamin Bridge, including land preparation expenses and the cost of a new building on the site.

“If an owner is ready to wait for 10 years before marketing the product and putting it on the shelf ... there’s probably an unconditional dedication to quality that is (there),” Deslauriers notes. “And that’s extremely rare. ...It’s one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to be part of a project where things are done from the inside out, and I kind of pinch myself every day.”

There are technical reasons why the Nova Scotia soil is perfect for sparkling wines. The growing seasons are short, Deslauriers notes, and the potential for ripeness is limited. The base wine for sparkling requires very little alcohol, because secondary fermentation adds a second dose. That means the grapes need to be very low in sugar. Deslauriers says that can be done anywhere in world, simply by picking very early. But Nova Scotia’s big advantage lies in being able to pick the grapes in mid-October, when their sugar content is as low as early August in California. “We have the ability to keep the grapes on the vines for an additional two months,” Deslauriers notes. That helps the maturity and complexity of the end product. Acidity, he adds, is another key to making more complex Champagne-style sparkling wine, as opposed to Italian-style Prosecco. Although Benjamin Bridge grapes are picked late, they maintain high acidity. “And that’s something that gives us a real competitive advantage.”

And just how rare is that combination? “As far as I know, it’s unique,” Deslauriers says.

But the timelines involved in sparkling wine production left the winery with a dilemma, according to McConnell-Gordon — how to get Benjamin Bridge’s name out there while the sparklings were waiting in the cellar for up to 10 years. The answer turned out to be another wine, Nova 7, the white that put them “on the map in terms of the Nova Scotia population,” she notes.

“Nova 7 allowed us to put something in the marketplace that we could start to build our brand — because no one knew of us prior to (that).”

It’s been a success — production ramped up from 225 cases in Nova 7’s first year to 2,966 cases this past year. But there has been no drop in standards, Deslauriers says, even with the increase in quantity. “We owe it to ourselves to hold ourselves to really high quality standards, because there’s a lot to lose for a brand like ours, to release anything that would be a lesser product or a lesser wine than the previous version.”



Benjamin Bridge is not the only success story in the province's growing industry.

Membership in the Winery Association of Nova Scotia has grown to 14, according to Christine White, the organization's director of communications and events. The association started in 2002 with six members. In the last five years alone, six new wineries have opened, White noted. There are currently 520 acres planted in the province. The industry and provincial government are working together on a plan that would, by 2020, increase the number of Nova Scotia wineries to 20 and bump the acreage of grapes grown up to 1,000.

Hanspeter Stutz, founder of Domaine de Grande Pré near Wolfville, says he has seen great improvement in the quality of local product since getting involved in the province's wine industry more than a decade ago. "Honestly, you couldn't drink the wine here, as a wine lover," he says of the early days.

But that's not the case anymore, says Stutz, sitting in Le Caveau, the renowned restaurant at Domaine de Grand Pré. He says visitors from Austria and Germany came through the day before and were impressed by the local Tidal Bay appellation: "Wow! Nova Scotia, this is high-quality wine," he recalls them saying. He adds: "These people are coming from wine regions."

Domaine de Grand Pré has won many awards since opening in 2000,

he notes. Quantities are kept low, in the range of 7,000 cases per year. "It's not our philosophy to be the largest. Our philosophy is to be the best."

And the restaurant has added to Grand Pré's reputation — Wine Access magazine recently chose Le Caveau as one of 20 best winery restaurants in the world, favourably stacking it up against operations from Australia to Argentina, South Africa to Spain. "That's an incredible, incredible announcement for us ... but it's not only for us — it's for the industry, and it's for the province," Stutz says.

But, he notes, hurdles remain to growing the Nova Scotia wine industry to the next level. Chief among those are provincial borders and liquor board monopolies. "For me, as a European, that's the most critical part," Stutz says.

Domaine de Grand Pré wine is available within Nova Scotia, but not in neighbouring provinces. "It's, for me, unbelievable that, in a domestic market, we have barriers between (provinces)," Stutz says. "It's easier for me to sell 20 cases to China, to Boston, to Zurich, to Stuttgart or somewhere than a case to Newfoundland or a case to New Brunswick. And that's wrong. That's completely wrong."

There is some hope — perhaps faint, but hope nonetheless — of action on that front. In September, Dan Albas, the Conservative MP for the riding of Okanagan-Coquihalla in British



Domaine de Grand Pré has been producing wines near Wolfville for more than a decade.



Getting a buzz

As reviews keep pouring in, Nova Scotia wines get critical acclaim

Nova Scotia's burgeoning wine industry is generating positive headlines both inside and outside the region. Here's a small taste:

"I'll say it straight. One of the best Canadian wines I've tasted comes from Nova Scotia. I'm only surprised that it didn't come from the Champagne region of France. It's called Benjamin Bridge Brut Reserve, a sparkling white crafted in the image of France's best bubbly. Brimming with orchard-fruit characters, notes of fresh brioche and stone-dry minerals, it tickles the palate with pinpoint-fine bubbles, the elegant sort of froth that makes your throat crave a second glass rather than burp."

Bepi Crosariol, wine columnist for the *Globe and Mail*, Sept. 7, 2011. *Full article online at: bit.ly/nswine*



"At the top of my list of wine regions to visit, this year, is a rather unlikely place, if you haven't been introduced to its constantly surprising wines: Nova Scotia. Over the last few months, I've had the chance to taste more and more wines from Canada's easternmost vineyards, planted in the valleys between the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Fundy. I've been regularly impressed by the beautiful freshness of many of their whites and some of their reds, and especially, their stupendously good sparkling wines. The bubbly is what should really bring the wine-loving world to Nova Scotia, with some offerings that are just off the charts. Benefiting from a cool and long growing season, producing grapes with good flavors, high acid and moderate alcohol, the region, according to many, shares many parameters with the best-known sparkling wine region in the world: Champagne. This comparison might be taken as the brainchild of an overeager marketing agent, but from what I've tasted, it's much more than that."

Remy Charest, Quebec City based journalist, food and writer, and translator, May 26, 2011. *Full article online at: bit.ly/nswine2*



"Nova Scotia has had a commercial wine industry since the late '70s, early '80s when Roger Dial opened the original Grand Pré and created some head-turning, palate pleasing wines that surprised the rest of Canada. But the industry didn't exactly explode after that. Recently, though, the fuse seems to have been re-lit and, if N.S. wine didn't quite detonate with the visit of national wine judges and journalists for the 2011 Canadian Wine Awards in August, it certainly approached the boiling point."

Craig Pinhey, member of Wine Access Magazine's National Tasting Panel, beverage columnist for the *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal* and *CBC Radio's Friday Wine Guy*. *Published in The Coast*, Sept. 22, 2011. *Full article online at: bit.ly/nswine3*

Columbia's wine country, tabled a private member's bill to help remedy the problem. Bill C-311 aims to repeal a Prohibition-era law, and make it OK for private citizens to purchase wine in one province and import that wine back home into another province for personal consumption. But private members' bills rarely become law, and as of deadline, Bill C-311 was still grinding its way through the parliamentary process.

Problems or not, Nova Scotia's wine producers are making headway, and looking to the future.

Back at Benjamin Bridge, general manager Devon McConnell-Gordon says the winery has had internal discussions about where it wants to be, while always maintaining quality. The current production level — 5,000 cases per year — is "very small," she acknowledges.

But she sees Nova 7 as a possible entry into bigger markets. And Benjamin Bridge would love to take its sparkling wine into places like New York City and London — "even go give the French a run for their money," she says.

"We have all those type of dreams. Can we do that on the scale of a boutique winery?"

The growth of the Nova Scotia industry has led wineries to support each other — "because we're pioneers and we can only be as strong as our weakest member," McConnell-Gordon says.

Good buzz for one winery, she notes, helps the others. "People try ours, or they try Gaspereau's, or Domaine de Grand Pré's, and they like it, so they want to try everyone else's. So then right there, you see several wineries getting exposure that maybe they wouldn't have normally had, through the success of someone else."

Deslauriers says there is "great spirit" among Nova Scotia's wineries.

"The industry is at a size that is very small. In order for a wine region to become a legitimate national destination, there needs to be a concentration of wineries that will create that destination, make it worthwhile for people to really come from away. We're not at this stage yet. ...

"Therefore I think most of the wineries understand, and it really has an impact on how we all relate to each other. I don't think we look at each other as competitors, but more as partners in a growing industry." | ABM