

Naramatans Establish Collective Bench Mark

Please approach the Bench. That'd be Bernie, back at the B.C. booze biz again. Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, the branding and marketing whiz who put the fun on the labels of Blasted Church, who revived a flagging winery by renaming it Lotusland, and who's done all sorts of other clever things with bottles and labels and corks.

This time he's come up with winged wine bottles flying over the bench lands of Okanagan Lake, poster art for the newly formed Naramata Bench Winery Association, which just had its coming-out party. That's what it was, a big all-hands-on-deck tasting at the Roundhouse in Yaletown, and coming-out sounds better than first annual, which always strikes me as playing with those dice Einstein insisted God didn't use on the universe. Those who

went said it was a great event, introductory or otherwise. Of course it was. Ten outstanding wineries from the Naramata side of the lake, each opening their "Best of the Bench" bottles: best white or red from the current release, each one teamed with some food creations from great restaurants here or there.

There was the Naramata Heritage Inn, Joie, the Barrel Room Bistro from Hillside Estate, plus Vancouver's Bis Moreno, Vij's, Le Gavroche, Lumière, and Les Amis du Fromage. Much sniffing and sipping and smacking of lips.

(An aside: the season's best new T-shirt has to be just out from dream ice-cream producer Gelato Fresco in Toronto: a vaguely Asian, stylized-brush-stroked ice-cream cone on the front, with the caption Zen Cone. On the back: "What is the sound of one lip smacking." Well, I thought it was funny; coulda been the gin...)

The treat at the Naramata event was that many of these wines are of limited availability and got their first public showing here. It was a smart move for these 10 independent

boutique wineries, who between them produce some outstanding wines.

The association has 100-percent membership from all of the operating wineries on the Bench and is ready to welcome a few under development: Laughing Stock Vineyards, Mistral Vineyards, and Summa Quies Vineyard.

Limited production is what we're talking about with these wineries and their wines, but no limits when it comes to quality. I mean, look what happened last fall at the Okanagan Wine Festival judging: four gold medals for Lake Breeze Vineyards alone, to everyone's surprise—including the winery's!

Uncorked
JURGEN GOTHE

Speaking of limited, there is a special run of 300 Best of the Bench collector's cases out there. (There was; I expect there are far fewer now that the tasting's done.) This sturdy

long box contains 10 serious Naramatans in a wooden-slab case with carrying handles and clip locks, a foldout map painted on the inside, and then the following, left to right:

- Nichol Vineyard 2000 unfiltered Syrah (great way to start)
- Kettle Valley Winery 2002 Rock Oven Red (half Cabernet, half Shiraz)
- Elephant Island Orchard Winery n/v Stellaport (fortified, port-style, from cherries; delicious)
- Lang Vineyards 1997 Pinot Auxerrois Brut (fine bubble, just coming into its own now)
- Lake Breeze Vineyards 2003 Pinot Gris (with the new label; can it repeat its success from last fall?)
- Hillside Estate Reserve Series 2002 Merlot (a keeper for the cellar)
- Poplar Grove Winery 2001 Red Reserve (mostly Merlot, a little Cabernet Franc; can't wait to set it next to Poplar's Tiger Blue cheese)
- La Frenz 2002 Shiraz (debut release for this varietal, new label design, a total run of 84 cases)



- Red Rooster Winery 2002 Meritage (its big Bordeaux blend: rich and dark; don't drink it so soon; make more space under the stairs)
- Benchland Vineyards 2001 Zweigelt (the third version of this varietal I've come across since Hainle got the ball rolling).

Buy the box for \$350 and apparently only from Marquis Wine Cellars on Davie Street (1034); call them to reserve yours and get someone to help you carry it out to the car. Watch for more winged bottles from the Naramata Bench, making B.C. wine waves.

If three-and-a-half Canada geese is a little straining on the budget this close to tax time, consider this fact from the accounting department: for the same price you could get nearly 40 bottles of Robert's Rock Chenin Blanc-Chardonnay!

This South African white has to be the best buy of the spring. As far as I've been able to determine, it is the only such blend on our shelves. You may have to rummage around, not just in the South African section but between a couple of liquor stores; it's caught on, especially at the current, discounted price of \$8.78.

For South Africa—which will be the theme country at next spring's Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival—this strikes me as a perfect (re-)introduction. Seems the wines haven't exactly been flying off the shelves, which I think is due to unfamiliarity, plus the fact the Yellow Tail troops are hitting us from all sides, with Aussie-rules marketing.

So start with the cheap stuff and then bring out the heavy hitters. (Saxenburg, one of South Africa's oldest family wineries and strictly focused on medium- to high-end wines, has been sniffing around B.C. lately: one to look forward to.)

Here's the spring sipping white, a fresh, bright blend, hearty with ripe fruit, uncomplicated, and full of flavour with a gentle grassy edge. The call for "barbecued fish, omelettes, pilaf, chicken kiev, salads and lightly flavoured vegetarian dishes" is spot-on.

What? Wine with eggs, salads? What will they think of next?

This is one to buy by the box. And this weekend, I'm going to see if the companion Cabernet-Merlot can provide the same pleasure for the palate. Then the ribs and the steaks can come out. ■