

The best wines you can't buy — except in



BEPPi CROSARIOL
WINES AND SPIRITS

For a country that can figure out how to pump natural gas safely across thousands of miles, Canada is doing a pretty lousy job of moving a far more critical natural resource across the land to those in need. I'm talking, of course, about British Columbia wine.

As many former Westerners who live in Eastern Canada know, finding a decent selection of B.C. wines in the hinterlands of Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes isn't easy. Finding many of the best brands is downright impossible.

The problem isn't technology; it's supply. There's simply too little of the best stuff to go around and too many knowledgeable B.C. wine aficionados who know where and when to scoop it up (hint: at the winery doors as it's released). Many of the top-ranked wines are sold almost entirely through winery boutiques or direct to restaurants, with just a trickle — if that — allocated to a few stores in such cities as Vancouver, Victoria and Calgary.

What follows is a list of highlights from my recent samplings. It's selective, but I think it reflects the generally impressive quality emerging from the province. (For Ontario residents, I'll cover highlights of the current Vintages release in next week's column.)

Among the more impressive whites you definitely won't find east of Saskatchewan is the whimsically named **Dirty Laundry Gewurztraminer Woo Woo Vines 2005** (\$16.90). Here's a product whose label last year finally rose to the quality of the wine. Formerly a sleepy little Okanagan Valley garage outfit named Scherzinger Vineyards, the winery was rechristened last year by former owners Ron and

Cher Watkins, who tapped the creative assistance of Bernie Hadley-Beauregard of Vancouver's brilliant design firm Brandever Strategy Inc.

While poring through the local history books for inspiration, Hadley-Beauregard chanced upon the tale of an early 1900s Chinese railway worker in nearby Summerland who ran a laundry. Clothing wasn't his only line of business, though. The establishment also happened to be the front for a brothel. It's nickname: The Dirty Laundry.

Since the winery's name change, bottles have been flying out the door, thanks also in part to the attractive label.

The look is bright-white, with a red, antique clothes iron in the centre giving off an embossed pattern of steam. Look closely, though, and you realize the steam plumes form the outline of a bunch of naked bodies (it's very tasteful and subtle). Among the wine's biggest new customers is top Vancouver restaurant Lumière, which, incidentally, had turned away the old Scherzinger wines.

Dirty Laundry Vineyard is particularly distinguished for its gewurztraminers, and the 2005 Woo Woo Vines is delicious, medium-bodied, silky and luscious, with big flavours of lychee and spice. Perfect for foods with highly aromatic spices, especially Asian fare.

Dirty Laundry Pinot Noir 2004 (\$23.90) also is pretty impressive, a good, delicate pinot for the money, light medium-bodied, hinting at cherry jam and beetroot, with crisp acidity.

(Happy footnote: The Watkinses recently sold Dirty Laundry for a tidy profit to a group of Alberta investors who plan to ramp up annual production from less than

2,000 cases to 4,000.)

One of the more impressive Canadian rieslings I have tasted in recent months is **Tantalus Riesling 2005** (\$19.90), the gorgeous product of another makeover story. Tantalus was founded in 2004 on a site near Kelowna formerly known as Pioneer Vineyards, which has been producing grapes since 1927.

This is the winery's debut riesling vintage, made from the concentrated fruit of mature, low-yielding vines planted in 1978. It's light, dry and luscious, with a blast of peach flavour and terrific balancing acidity and nuances of citrus and slate. Just 700 cases were produced.

(For the record, one of the other impressive Canadian rieslings I have tasted recently is **Cave Spring CSV Riesling 2004** from Niagara, \$30, released last month through Vintages stores in Ontario. This flagship riesling from veteran winemaker Angelo Pavan also is made from vines averaging 28 years of age, with just a hint of off-dry sweetness and brilliant citrus-like fruit and subtle mineral notes. I bet it would pair nicely with freshwater trout or even sautéed shellfish such as shrimps or scallops dressed in citrus and spices.)

Another B.C. winery to benefit from Brandever Strategy's makeover magic is Blasted Church, named for an old religious edifice that was moved off its foundation to a new location with the help of, yes, explosives. **Blasted Church Revered Series Chardonnay 2004** (\$26) recently took home a gold medal at Wine Access magazine's Canadian Wine Awards, and rightly so. This excellent white from winemaker Kelly Moss is full-bodied, with notes of peach and candied

fruit, a silky texture, and a hint of honey-like sweetness followed by a crisp, dry finish.

Worth seeking out among full-bodied reds is the excellent **Jackson-Triggs Sun Rock Vineyard Merlot 2004** (\$32.99), rich and smooth, with dark-skinned fruit flavours and hints of chocolate and fresh-roasted coffee. Good for lamb or beef, it should also age well for several years.

Very impressive for its ripeness and heft is the very rare **Poplar Grove Winery Reserve Claret Blend 2003** (\$50). Winemaker Ian Sutherland has crafted a big, opulent red from the prime Naramata district on the southern shore of Okanagan Lake.

Full-bodied and creamy, this Bordeaux-style mix of merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon shows flavours of ripe black cherry and plum underpinned by vanilla and charred wood. Lots of oak here, but oodles of fruit to back it up. It should be a good choice for rare steak.

And if you can afford it, consider **Osoyoos Larose Le Grand Vin 2003** (\$40), the third impressive vintage of a Bordeaux-style red blend created by a partnership between Canada's Vincor International and French firm Groupe Taillan.

Made from five Bordeaux grape varieties grown near Lake Osoyoos in the southern Okanagan Valley, it exudes the kind of restrained elegance you would expect of a good red Bordeaux.

And how nice of the Vincor people to save some for Ontarians: It was just released last month through LCBO Vintages stores.

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Pick of the week

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