

Patience is rewarded as Foreign Affair Winery produces stunning wines



Waters & Wine
Christopher Waters

The first thing I learned about wine was that it was pursuit that required patience. As Orson Welles said in those old television commercials, "Paul Mason will sell no wine before its time."

As a youngster, I had no notion that the red and white liquid in those jugs had little resemblance to what passes for fine wine. I saw popping the lid off of a Paul Masson carafe as a ticket to the life of refinement suggested by the tuxedo-clad Welles.

Those advertisements, however, did smack of — at least — one truth. As a wine writer, I have learned that patience is something inextricably linked to the production of fine wine. I continually taste wines that are months or years away from being released to the public. So I get really excited when I can share the news that one of these sleeping beauties comes to life — at least, to market.

In this case, it's the arrival of Len Crispino's stunningly innovative (and enjoyable) wines, produced under the equally stunningly innovative (and enjoyable) label, Foreign Affair Winery.

The whimsical label that drops iconic Canadian animals — a moose, a bear, a flock of Canadian geese — into an Italian landscape was inspired by the fact that Crispino's desire to get into the wine business was fostered during a stint as a trade ambassador to Italy. While stationed in Milan, Crispino developed a love for Amarone, particularly the otherworldly wines from Giuseppe Quintarelli. The stylish and savvy labels are the work of the prolific Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, of Vancouver's Brandever.

Crispino, who is now president and chief executive officer of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, credits Quintarelli's Alzero — a miraculous Port-like red that is produced from old vine Cabernet Franc fruit that is dried for five or six months before pressing — as a major inspiration for his new winery.

In 2004, he picked a small amount of Cabernet Franc from his 40-acre Vineland vineyard with an eye towards drying it to produce an Amarone-style wine. He hoped his experiment would have some of the richness, concentration and glycerine-like sweetness that made Alzero such a revolutionary wine. He got his wish.

The labour-intensive wine was down-

right delicious. The aromatically complex wine suggests a mix of dried raisin, licorice and black cherry/kirsch-like notes, while the palate boasts an impressive tannic structure, with lots of extract and a sumptuous texture. It is a monumental wine that John Howard, winery owner and a long-time friend of Crispino, calls "the single greatest innovation in Ontario wine since (Inniskillin's Karl) Kaiser developed icewine."

Crispino repeated the process with increasing volumes of fruit in 2005 and 2006 before he and consulting winemaker Andre Lipinski decided to expand the range to produce a number of estate-grown wines that all had a dried fruit component (ranging from 15 to 100 per cent). Varieties, such as Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Pinot Noir, that have rarely, if ever, been put through the "appassimento" process (which involves drying a selected portion of grapes) were produced with 15 to 20 per cent passito (the Italian term for dried grape wine) in the finished wine. These wines obviously lose some varietal character (trading fresh fruit notes for intense dried fruit character) in the process, but Crispino and Lipinski are hoping they gain a richness and intensity that will thrill wine lovers looking for something different.

The expansion of Crispino's production saw fruit being dried in the winemaking facility and a nearby barn on the grounds of the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre. The research station is also home to Foreign Affair's well-appointed tasting room, which is open this weekend to release its opening inventory of wines, including the concentrated and citrusy 2007 Sauvignon Blanc (\$32.50), the perfumed and spicy 2007 Riesling (\$28) and the 2006 Cabernet Franc (\$110). The red wine's price reflects the lengthy period of air drying (more than 100 days) that concentrated the grape sugars and flavours and produced a heady wine with more than 16 per cent alcohol. It's expensive, but then wines of this quality always are.

More wines are still tucked away in the cellar, including a magical 2007 Chardonnay and stellar 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon, awaiting future release. Once again, Orson had it right. Patience is required.

*The Foreign Affair Winery, 4890 Victoria Ave., Vineland, Ont., 905-562-9898
www.foreignaffairwinery.com.*

Christopher Waters is founding editor of VINES magazine and wine appreciation coordinator at the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute, Brock University. His wine articles are archived at www.watersandwine.com. He can be reached by e-mail at vin@vaxxine.com.