Decanter

Wine lover's guide to NIAGARA

Nestled in southern Ontario within day-tripping distance from Toronto, Canada's largest vineyard area has grown into a world-class wine tourism destination

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Arriving at Inniskillin in Niagara-on-the-Lake





For decades, the Niagara peninsula – set on the southern banks of Lake Ontario, just 90 minutes from gateway city Toronto – was synonymous with one drink: ice wine. Aided by reliably frosty but sheltered winters and hot growing seasons, local vinous reputations in the 1990s were built on this decadently sweet style, wrought from naturally frozen Vidal and Cabernet Franc grapes.

Times have moved on, both for wine and tourism, and Niagara has grown from a laidback farming corner dotted with century-old barns to a swanky vineyard region, where sublime dry table wines are paired with Michelin-starred restaurants and architecturally dramatic tasting rooms. The region is now Canada's answer to Bordeaux or Napa – though, with its relaxed hospitality and nearby natural wonder of Niagara Falls, it maintains a distinctly local character.

History in the making

Stretching over nearly 2,000km² and 10 different sub-regions, all bordering the sprawling blue monolith of Lake Ontario, the Niagara peninsula is geographically varied, with exciting and diverse wine profiles. There's a marked shift in terroir from the warm, eastern district of Niagara-on-the-Lake, which butts up against the US border at the Niagara river, to the broad central and western swathes around St Catharines and Beamsville, which are dominated by the vast limestone ridge of the Niagara escarpment.

It's in the latter that you'll find one of Ontario's oldest producers, **Henry of Pelham** *(henryofpelham.com)*. The Speck family has been farming this land since 1794, and their historic homestead-turned-cellar-door is now run by sixth-generation brothers Paul, Matthew and Daniel. Walk-in tastings and tours are the perfect introduction to the wider Niagara region's history, as well as their eclectic range, which includes traditional-method sparkling Cuveé Catharine Brut (Chardonnay and Pinot Noir with 54 months on lees), citrussy Rieslings and inky, darkly fruited Baco Noir.



Things are similarly atmospheric a 13km drive to the west at **Vineland** *(vineland.com)* – the 73ha estate is set around an 1845-built Mennonite homestead that features a chapel and restaurant with sweeping views over undulating vines. It was the late German winemaker Hermann Weis who first recognised the site's potential in the 1970s and imported Riesling vines from his native Mosel.

The estate, under long-serving winemaker Brian Schmidt, still specialises in the grape, which thrives here on the sloping escarpment. For more expressions of this cooler-climate pocket, try **Malivoire** *(malivoire.com)* for Gamay and minimal-intervention **Tawse** *(tawsewinery.ca)* nearby.

Warming up

Around 40km by road to the east, warmer weather coupled with sand and clay soils produce some of the region's finest red wines, and the pretty town of Niagara-on-the-Lake makes an atmospheric and buzzy base when striking out to the dozens of small-scale surrounding vineyards. **Southbrook Vineyards** *(southbrook.com)* showcases what's possible in the region with organic, biodynamic and regenerative methods via its structured Chardonnay and bright Pinot Noir wines, while larger **Inniskillin** *(inniskillin.com; pictured on p86)* is the original flag-bearer for ice wine.

Towards the Niagara river, **Two Sisters Vineyards** *(twosistersvineyards.com)* and its nearby elite sibling winery **Stone Eagle** *(stoneeaglewinery.com)* indicate the direction Niagara hospitality is travelling with grand tasting rooms, polished dining options and serious Bordeaux-style blends. At the former, tastings of creamy Chardonnay and red-fruity Cabernet Franc are best rounded off with a meal in the onsite Italian restaurant Kitchen76. At the latter, the Signature Experience pairs a flight of their five wines – including a Sauvignon Blanc-Semillion blend and two ageable Bordeaux-style red blends – with paired nibbles. Or, if you're feeling extra flush, try the Beluga caviar pairing.

Clockwise from above left: Stone Eagle's Grand Cellar private dining space; vines and patios at Ravine; lunch at Kitchen76 at Two Sisters Vineyards



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As is often the case in New World wine regions, Niagara has a healthy attitude towards experimentation. That doesn't always mean wine; at **Ironwood Cider House** *(ironwoodcider.ca)*, right on Lake Ontario's shore, the focus is firmly on apples, but with a winemaker's approach to precision. Single-variety bottlings, barrel-ferments and careful ageing produce one-of-a-kind, limited-edition ciders (try the crisp, tart Bramley).

Meanwhile, B-Corp **Stratus Vineyards** *(stratuswines.com)* firmly eschews Niagara-on-the-Lake's prevailing Bordeaux beat and has planted 16 grape varieties across its 22ha farm, which it bottles primarily as single varietals. From its LEED-certified facility it sells Sangiovese aged in amphora, unfiltered Chardonnay, Viognier and an ancestral field blend, as well as flagship red and white blends.

Keeping it simple

In contrast to Stratus' highly polished tasting experience, **Pearl Morissette** *(see 'Address book', p88)* in Jordan produces lively, minimal-intervention Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay and Riesling, which you can taste in an unpretentious converted barn cellar door. (Or if you're visiting between May and early autumn – the best time to come to Niagara ►

My perfect day in Niagara

MORNING

After a tasty lobster Benedict breakfast at **Treadwell Cuisine** *(treadwellcuisine.com)* in Niagara-on-the-Lake, get an intro to the region's diversity with tastings at Stratus and Stone Eagle – handily set just across the street from each other, a five-minute drive out of town. At the former, you'll get an understanding of the variety of grapes that can thrive in Niagara; at the latter, you'll taste the pinnacle of regional Bordeaux-style blending.

AFTERNOON

Head westward from the Niagara-on-the-Lake district to the cooler slopes of the Niagara Escarpment, where Burgundian-style wines dominate. Book in advance for a visit to Bachelder (see p89), located about 35km by road from Ravine, where if you're lucky, owner Thomas Bachelder will regale you with his philosophy while you enjoy a tasting of single-vineyard bottlings of elegant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

LUNCH

Pop over to **Ravine** *(ravinevineyard.com)*, 10km to the south, for a low-key lunch on the pizza patio overlooking Chardonnay vines, or a spread from the onsite bakery (the pastries are epic). While you're here, enjoy a tasting of the traditional- and Charmat-method sparkling wines, Rieslings and Bordeaux-varietal reds. The first vines were planted here in 1869, making it the region's inaugural commercial vineyard – a slice of Niagara history.

EVENING

Double back 15km to Jordan for an informal tasting of Pearl Morissette's wines before enjoying a spectacular Michelin two-star tasting menu in its dining room (make sure to book well in advance; see *'Address book', p88*), set in a converted barn overlooking farmland. A thorough celebration of local produce from start to finish, the meal can be paired with fine international bottlings that hop from Valpolicella to Santorini, as well as their own lively wines.





Your Niagara address book

ACCOMMODATION

124 on Queen Hotel & Spa, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Plumly placed on Niagara-on-the-Lake's high street, this contemporary spot makes a comfortable and stylish base for longer stays – particularly if you book a room with a kitchenette. ***124queen.com***

Inn on the Twenty, Jordan Station
Within walking distance of rural Pearl Morissette, this small stay is home to its own acclaimed restaurant.
vintage-hotels.com

Prince of Wales, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The grand brick frontage of this 1864-built hotel tempts visitors in from Niagara-on-the-Lake's high street. Inside, it's a full-on regal Georgian fantasy, with gilded walls and polished woodwork, and daily afternoon teas. ***vintage-hotels.com***

RESTAURANTS

Pearl Morissette, Jordan Station
One of only two Michelin two-star restaurants in Canada, Pearl Morissette very much lives up to its celebrated status with a cutting-edge design – it's set on the upper floor of a reimagined barn space – ultra-polished service and faultless cooking. The question isn't whether you should go, however, it's if you can get a reservation. They're released in tranches via the website and are typically snapped up within minutes. ***pearlmorissette.com***



Ravine Vineyard, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Fixed-price dinner menus at this winery and restaurant feature top-drawer Canadian produce – think British Columbian octopus (braised and grilled), Ontario beef (laced with black truffle in tartare) and Niagara pork chop (smoked and paired with Niagara peaches – arguably the world's best). You can also come for lunchtime pizzas on the patio or an array of breakfast pastries, plus wine tastings, obviously. ***ravinevineyard.com***

Treadwell Cuisine, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Tucked just off the Georgian high street of Niagara-on-the-Lake, all-day restaurant Treadwell serves up Canadian-inflected European flavours – think brioche French toast with blackberries for breakfast; lobster club sandwich with smoked bacon for lunch; or sockeye salmon with fried courgette blossom for dinner.
treadwellcuisine.com

THINGS TO DO

Ball's Falls Conservation Area
Get a better grip on the geographical impact of the 1,050km-long Niagara escarpment, which shapes winemaking throughout the region, at this education-focused conservation area in Lincoln. Tour the timewarp 1800s-era settlement and see the waterfalls that rush over the rim of the escarpment nearby. ***npca.ca***

Downtown Niagara-on-the-Lake
Established as a British colony in the 18th century before being destroyed during the War of 1812 and rebuilt in Georgian splendour, Niagara-on-the-Lake is the region's main tourist hub. Its high street of independent shops and restaurants is complemented by boutique inns and easy access to dozens of wineries. ***notl.com***

Niagara Falls
One of North America's most spectacular natural wonders, thunderous Niagara Falls is only a half-hour drive from the core of the wine region. As well as various experiences interacting with the falls, you can enjoy the immersive film *Niagara Takes Flight*, dine overlooking the water at Table Rock restaurant or tour the historic power station, built using technology designed by legendary inventor Nikola Tesla.
niagaraparks.com

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What to drink in the region

The classic Bordeaux and Burgundy varieties thrive here, along with Riesling – though given the experimentalist New World mentality, you'll also find hybrids (such as Baco Noir), Rhône varieties and the occasional Italian grape. As a general rule, in the western or central part of the VQA region (home to the Niagara escarpment) cooler-climate varieties thrive, and in warmer Niagara-on-the-Lake, those that require a little bit more heat and sunlight to fully ripen. However, expect the full spectrum of styles across the entire region, from elegant sparklings through to juicy, rich reds and syrupy ice wines – plus local beers, ciders and spirits, if you fancy a change of pace.

in general – under an oak tree onsite.) It's an unfussy set-up, but don't be fooled – there's serious attention to detail here; case in point, just above its winery is Ontario's first Michelin two-star restaurant.

For an even more unexpected tasting experience, try **Bachelder** *(bachelderniagara.com)* which pours some of Canada's finest Burgundian-style Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays in a modest house in Beamsville (appointment only). Each of its single-plot bottlings, from Wismer-Wingfield in Twenty Mile Bench to Frontier Block in Lincoln Lakeshore, is a study in Niagara terroir – which, given the region's youth, is still being mapped. A love letter to Canadian wine in its purest form. D

Clockwise from above: Queen St in Niagara-on-the-Lake; the afternoon tea experience at NOTL Bar & Restaurant in 124 on Queen Hotel & Spa; brioche French toast with blackberries at Treadwell Cuisine; the gardens at Pearl Morissette