
SIPPING ALONG

FRUIT WINES COME OF AGE

BY CHARMIAN CHRISTIE



Fruit wines are the Rodney Dangerfield of alcoholic beverages: they just don't get no respect. Part of this comes from their less palatable predecessors, part from lack of exposure. The new generation of fruit wines ranges from sophisticated dry dinner wines to alluringly sweet liqueurs. The only problem now is getting them to your table.

According to Liz Driver – food historian, *Edible Toronto* columnist, and author of *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949* – fruit wines have been part of Ontario cuisine since the early settlers arrived. “Settlers used any and all food items they could find. If they could turn them into wine, they would do so,” Driver says, noting they favoured sweeter versions. Apples, pears, plums, peaches, rhubarb, dandelions and even parsnips ended up in the wine glass. Making homemade wines was so commonplace that many houses had a special room devoted to distilling.

Unlike the cloying beverages Great Aunt Emma used to make, today's fruit wines can be beautifully dry. And Ontario produces more than its share of award winners. Sunnybrook Farm Estate Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake has won more than 250 medals while neighbouring Southbrook Vineyards' Framboise was dubbed World's Top Fruit Wine.

So why aren't these award winners lining the shelves of local liquor stores? Chris Layton, spokesperson for the LCBO, says that, although the liquor board is a strong supporter of homegrown products, securing floor space is a matter of supply and demand. It's almost impossible for a small fruit winery to supply enough for each of the LCBO's 602 retail outlets, and he claims there is presently not enough consumer demand for fruit wines, adding, “Consumer focus is on grapes.” A few fruit wines can be found in LCBO stores, but not enough to ease the frustrations of producers.

Don't expect to see fruit wines at grocery stores or malls, either. Since 1993, wineries – both grape and fruit – have been

permitted to sell their products directly to the consumer through one store only – on site. The kiosks you see at grocery stores and malls were grandfathered and belong to industry giants Vincor Canada and Andrés Wines. Fortunately, most fruit wineries do ship their products within Canada. Some have wine clubs that ship a selection of wines to subscribers on a regular basis.

In an effort to promote members' products, Fruit Wines of Ontario (FWO) has been urging the provincial government to allow the sale of fruit wines at farmers' markets alongside other agricultural products. Despite eighteen months of lobbying, FWO Executive Director Jim Warren says the government has so far been unresponsive.

Getting the wines out there – and providing tastings – would undoubtedly increase consumer demand for them. Fruit

wine producers are well aware that the ghosts of fruit wines past are haunting them now. Fred Archibald of Archibald's Orchard and Estate Winery in Bowmanville relates that “history is tainted by poor performers – homemade or highly commercialized [fruit wines] that didn't represent the fruit well.” Tried one that reminded you of cough syrup? Archibald says, “If you [think you] don't like fruit wines, you haven't had a good one.”

To raise the standards, Canadian fruit vintners voluntarily undergo the same rigorous testing and judging as their VQA (Vintners Quality Assurance) counterparts. Qualified fruit wines can earn the Quality Certified (QC) seal from the certifying body of Fruit Wines of Canada,

Sunnybrook was Canada's first fruit winery, founded in 1993. Owner Gerald Goertz could paper his store with the huge number of awards his winery has won, but claims he and his wife, Vivien, do not keep count of such things: their focus is on making perfect wine. A millwright by trade, Goertz applies his engineer's mind to winemaking. He describes himself as meticulous, particular and organized. But perfection doesn't come easily. Not only do fruit wines take more time than grape wines



to ferment (strawberries can take up to a year), they also require more labour. To meet his own exacting standards, he starts with sound, perfect fruit. “No bruising, no rot. Bruising drops the quality. You can taste the rot, and it affects the colour.”

Archibald Orchards and Estate Winery is an example of the ingenuity behind the creation of many fruit wineries. In 1982, knowing the wholesale apple market would reject their less-than-perfect hail-damaged apples, the Archibalds turned their orchards into a pick-your-own operation with reduced prices. Realizing they enjoyed dealing directly with consumers, they quickly added a farmers’ market, a play area and a school tour program. Fred Archibald began experimenting with apple wines a few years later. Unlike the instant success of his ciders, pies and preserves, perfecting his apple wines took almost a decade. Archibald continues to make new fruit wines each year, without mimicking the taste or style of grape wines. “There’s nothing in it for me to make a black currant wine taste like a Merlot,” he says. “Because customers don’t know what to expect, fruit wines come without boundaries.” And the Archibalds push the limits in winning ways. Their apple-inspired wines, which range from dry to dessert, have won numerous National Fruit Wineries of Canada awards.

Unlike Archibald’s, Southbrook’s main business is grape wine. One of the few fruit wine makers to use the Port method, they produce only a few intense, liqueur-like fruit wines having a base of 96.4% certified-Canadian spirits. Frozen berries, grown either on site or sourced locally, are soaked for two to four days before being pressed and bottled. Owner Bill Redelmeier relates that bad weather gave them their start in the fruit wine business. It was too cold and wet back in 1992 for their pick-your-own-raspberries sideline, so they froze the berries, intending to make jam. Instead of the 400 to 500 pounds of raspberries they anticipated, however, the harvest yielded three tons. “That’s a lot of jam!” he says. Instead, they made wine. Their technique perfected, Southbrook’s signature Framboise was the only fruit wine to win a gold medal at the 1997 International Wine & Spirit Competition. It’s been winning rave reviews ever since.

Under an expanded definition set up by Fruit Wines of Canada, fruit wines can be made using any fruit other than grapes, and can include spices, chocolate, and even honey and

maple syrup. The latter two have been included because Canadians have been making wines from these ingredients for centuries.

Embracing this broadened description, Rush Creek Wines in Aylmer creates unique and palate-pleasing variations. Maple Rush, made with 100 percent maple syrup, has won double gold internationally and tastes like a fermented version of its namesake. On the other end of the sugar spectrum, their Pearfection won Best Dry White Fruit Wine of 2007 at the All Canadian Wine Championships. Their Rhubarb wine is increasingly popular, as well.

Although it has yet to win an award, Rush Creek’s strawberry-chocolate Decadence is a quick-change act that leaves tasters intrigued. Owner Wendy Flintoft describes Decadence as “sinfully delicious,” but it’s also a magic trick in a bottle. On the nose, the smell is that of pure chocolate, but in the mouth, the chocolate disappears and is replaced by full-flavoured strawberry. “It’s timed to be unique,” Flintoft says. “The chocolate then returns, as if you’re tasting a chocolate-dipped strawberry.” Rush Creek rounds out its unique selection with a cookbook, *From Plate to Palate*, filled with original recipes designed specifically to teach customers how to cook with and pair fruit wines.

Whether you want a dry wine to go with ham, a less dry wine for pairing with curry, or a dessert wine that dances in your mouth, fruit wines offer full fruit flavours, not just hints or undertones. As tastes drift to new world offerings, fruit wines might be able to ride the coattails of change. “Consumers are becoming more adventurous,” the LCBO’s Layton says with confidence, “which is a good thing.”

For more information on Ontario fruit wine producers, visit www.fruitwinesofontario.com. □

An inquisitive palate and itchy feet keep freelance writer Charmian Christie on the go. When not on the road, she makes her home in Guelph, where she shares a century home with her husband and more measuring cups than she cares to admit.