

The grapes and the vintners dig into Quebec

By Elizabeth Warkentin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUNHAM, Quebec — Thirty years ago, no one in la belle province would have imagined that its wines would one day be coveted by Hollywood stars the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow.

Back then, wine in Quebec was considered unpalatable or, at best, mediocre.

Indeed, Bill Zacharkiw, sommelier, restaurant owner, and wine columnist for the Montreal Gazette, once consigned the entire Quebec wine industry to the dumpster. But now he's making amends.

"I recently toured several wineries in the Eastern Townships," he wrote, "and was shocked by not only the quality and diversity of the wines being made but by the passion and dedication of a number of our winemakers."

Having recently returned to Quebec after a 20-year absence, I decided it was time I investigated. I would take a mini road trip to the Route des vins in the Eastern Townships, an hour's drive southeast of Montreal, to see what all the foodie hullaballoo was about.

My mother decided to join me, and on a Saturday morning in late August we set off across the traffic-clogged Champlain bridge toward Dunham, the heart of the Route des vins.

The region's first township, Dunham is typical of Quebec's British colonial and Loyalist era, when colonists loyal to the king fled the United States to settle the verdant valleys to the north, granting them names like Sutton, Bedford, Stanbridge, Brigham, and Knowlton — Norman Rockwell villages strung like charms along Quebec's border with Vermont.

Rolling along at 20 miles an hour down rue Principale, we passed Chamberland's Antiques, crammed with colonial furniture. Farther down the main strip we spotted Les Chocolats Colombe, makers of artisanal chocolates, nougats, and



ELIZABETH WARKENTIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Guillaume Leroux, left, and his partners started Val Caudalies southwest of Montreal in 2004 — where apple trees had grown. The winery opened in 2007 and produces 40,000 bottles a year of rosé, cider, and white wine.

pastries. At the junction of Routes 202 and 213 was Homei Bistro, with its wraparound porch, and next to it, Brasserie Dunham, a trendy restaurant, bistro, and brewery combo with a large courtyard patio, serving foods of the terroir, locally-sourced products.

After getting a map of La Route des vins at the La Rumeur Affamée bakery we continued south along Route 213. Two miles up the hill we pulled up to a red barn, home of the Val Caudalies, a vineyard and cider mill set against green hills and apple trees.

It was during a stint in a winery in the Montérégie region southwest of Montreal, that co-owner Guillaume Leroux, now in his early 30s, acquired his vinicultural passion. Having conveyed his zeal to his childhood friends Julien Vailancourt and Alexis Perron, the trio purchased the 110-acre orchard property from the Tremblay family in 2004 and set out to plant vines where none had grown before.

"We were naive and ambitious enough to believe we could do it," said Leroux, grinning as he worked the counter at the tasting boutique and poured me a small glass of their white wine, the Val Caudalies.

Sometimes a combination of youthful naivete and hard work and ambition, blessed by the hand of Mother Nature these past mild winters, pays off.

The Val Caudalies opened to the public in 2007, and today, the "chevaliers du Vidal," as they've been dubbed by the French-language press, produce 40,000 bottles a year of rosé, cider, and white wine made from the hardy Vidal grape. The three have already amassed numerous distinctions for their wines and ciders.

But the young winemakers' talents don't stop there. They're savvy businessmen, and, like chevaliers, they're gallant, too. Leroux and Perron expertly handled a steady stream of locals and tourists, filling glasses and explaining each wine or cider's attributes, all the while smiling and warmly welcoming new visitors, switching between French and English with ease.

Leaving Val Caudalies with two bottles of apple grape cider, we headed west on Route 202.

One of the oldest wineries in Quebec, Vignoble l'Orpailleur, stands on the grounds of a turn-of-the-20th-century inn. Guests can taste and buy wines, enjoy a meal at the vineyard's charming restaurant with a vine-covered patio, or visit their wine

If you go . . .

Where to stay B&B Domaine des chutes

6 chemin des Chutes, Frelighsburg
011-450-298-5444
www.chutes.qc.ca
Two miles west of Frelighsburg village, this B&B and art gallery overlooking the Pike River offers five uniquely decorated rooms with ensuite baths, \$91- \$101, with breakfast. Guests can swim in the river.

Au chant de l'onde

6, rue de L'Église, Frelighsburg
011-450-298-5676
www.auchantdelonde.ca
On the Pike River in the center of town, this B&B has four rooms, each with private bath, \$101-\$172.

Where to eat

Aux deux clochers

2, rue de l'Église, Frelighsburg
011-450-298-5086
Popular restaurant serving local, seasonal cuisine with veranda overlooking the Pike River. Croque Monsieur, veggie burger, or mango and duck salad,

\$8-\$13; grilled meats and fish \$12-\$25; Table d'hôte Friday evenings \$10-\$23.

Les sucreries de l'étable

16, rue Principale, Frelighsburg
011-450-298-5181
www.lessucreriesdelerable.com
Housed in the old general store, famous for its wide variety of savory and sweet pies, notably the maple sugar pie.

Homei Bistro and café

3809, rue Principale, Dunham
011-450-284-0522
www.homeibistro.com
Pairs fresh, local ingredients with the flavors of Asia. Reopens end of March.

Nid de poule

3260, 10e rang, Dunham
011-450-248-0009
www.niddepoule.com
Restaurant and charming inn off the beaten path. Changing seasonal menu featuring local specialties. All-inclusive five-course menu \$45 for guests of the inn; \$52 visitors.

Information

www.laroutedesvins.ca/en

history museum, housed in a lemon-colored building reminiscent of an Old West saloon.

In the late 1970s, deeming the quality of the soil around Dunham suitable for planting vine, Frenchmen Hervé Durand and Charles-Henri de Coussergues, along with Quebecers Frank Furtado and Pierre Rodrigue, decided to launch a wine business, adapting viticultural methods used in Northern Europe to prevent the grapes from freezing in Quebec's brutal winters.

Since 2000, Orpailleur wines have garnered over 70 medals in international wine competitions, including the United Kingdom's prestigious Decanter Awards.

Entering the property through an arched trellis

draped in vines, we headed through the leafy courtyard to the museum-cum-tasting-room, where I was greeted by Dave Tremblay, director of sales and marketing.

"You see these grapes," said Tremblay, handling a fist-size cluster of white grapes as he walked me through fields interspersed with windmills to prevent cold air from settling over the fruit. "Try one." I did. It was sweet and flavorful and juicy. "These will be ready to harvest next week."

If Quebec's vintners have enjoyed success it's no thanks to the province's rigid liquor board. In the early days, in the 1980s, said Tremblay, "You weren't allowed to sell wine on site and you weren't allowed to sell to restaurants."

Still, Tremblay said, today they are more receptive to Quebec vintners.

"People are like wine," he said, commenting on the slow but steady change of attitude. "The older we get, the less attractive we become, but the better we get with age."

We felt hungry, so we headed to the postcard village of Frelighsburg, five miles north of the Vermont line. A walk in this town of 1,028 residents is like stepping through a door to the past. The old general store and grammar school still stand, repurposed as a bakery and an arts center respectively.

Like Dunham, this area is known for its epicurean dishes from the terroir. For a vegan like myself, duck confits, foie gras, and pâtés, however local, are out. So, at Aux Deux Clochers, which has a riverside patio, I had a veggie burger with fries.

Back in the car, we headed to Domaine du Ridge by way of a tunnel of trees along Ridge Road. From his vineyard, owner Denis Paradis can gaze upon Jay Peak, 30 miles away in Vermont, from his little slice of paradise in St. Armand.

A lawyer and politician, the affable Paradis initially planted 2,000 vines 15 years ago.

"I did it for fun, but my hobby became a passion," he said from the sunbathed patio, as we looked out to the fields guarded by imaginatively-designed scarecrows.

The vineyard now yields 100,000 bottles a year, even producing champagne, or a rosé méthode champenoise, since "we're not allowed to call it champagne," Paradis said.

Twelve hundred bottles of Ridge's annual yield are made by the ancestral foot-trampling method. He pointed to a large wooden tub on the grass. "But I only let the ladies do it," he said. "And only with clean feet."

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