

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY: 6 BARRELS FOR 6 CHEFS

A match made in heaven

Annual wine and food pairing only adds to the County's gastronomic reputation - and it's all for a great cause

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
JUNE 21, 2008

It was a typical summer day in Toronto. Pavements sizzled and the air was thick with humidity and murmurs of weekend escapes to the cottage. As the city melted, my husband and I were sitting in an air-conditioned Lincoln Town Car with two friends, destined for an outdoor feast in Prince Edward County. Oh, and it was only Wednesday. It was a very grown-up way to play hooky.

We didn't know much about the event beyond its name: 6 Barrels for 6 Chefs. A sign had been posted a few weeks ago at the Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar announcing the pairing of six wines with six of Ontario's most creative culinary artists. The location: Huff Estates winery. That's all the convincing we needed to make the 2½-hour journey east to "the County."

It turned out that the meal last August was the first of an annual charity event benefiting Camp Trillium, a program of the Trillium Childhood Cancer Support Centre. This year's event is another midweek affair, scheduled for July 2, with tickets costing \$140 a person.

It's yet another point of pride for Prince Edward County, which has become the gastronomic capital of Ontario - a fertile island bursting with vineyards, organic farms and a community of artists and chefs. Tucked into the "golden triangle" between Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa, it is the province's newest Designated Viticultural Area, which helps identify the origin of a wine and its grapes.

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And Huff Estates is a highlight. The property - 60 hectares of limestone-rich land at the corner of Highway 62 and County Road 1 - was settled in the 1820s by the Huff family. Owner Lanny Huff, a chemical engineer by trade who has worked in the plastics industry for 40 years, is now fulfilling a lifelong dream of growing vines on his ancestral soil.

Huff's cellar, only four years old, is modern and minimalist. The sleek concrete structure houses a high-tech operation of monstrous stainless-steel vats and traditional barrels that together are used to produce classic Bordeaux varieties such as merlot and cabernet franc as well as more traditional white wines such as chardonnay, riesling and pinot gris. The estate has won numerous medals over the years, and its 2004 chardonnay was named the official wine of the Ontario Legislature for 2005-06.

It was the fermenting process that inspired Huff winemaker Frédéric Picard and friend Bryan Steele, the chef at the Old Prune Restaurant in Stratford, Ont., to organize 6 Barrels for 6 Chefs.

"One winter, as Bryan and I were enjoying a barrel tasting together, we came up with the idea," Picard said. "Our goal was to illustrate the nuances between the same wine aged in different oak barrels and to explore how each one could be elevated when paired with food prepared by a great chef."

Picard and Steele were there to greet us on our visit. Six small white marquees dotted the expansive vineyard. Under each, a team guided by a master chef toiled over open fires and makeshift workstations to feed about 100 people who would, by the end of the evening, run through the first tasting menu of its kind.

The wine pairings seemed simple enough: three versions of Huff Estates South Bay Chardonnay 2006 and three of Norman Hardie's Pinot Noir 2006. (Hardie, like Picard, has made a name for himself as one of the County's most talented winemakers. He studied the craft at the University of Dijon and worked as a sommelier with Four Seasons Hotels.) The difference in taste, however, was remarkable. A little booklet told us about barrel specifications - volume, toast, cooperage. We were left to enjoy each sip and bite, drinking wines that had not yet been bottled for mass consumption and savouring uniquely prepared dishes straight from chef to plate.

Starting with Steele's ceviche of hamachi with coconut, citrus, Thai basil and mint, we then moved to Kennedy's wild rice meunière, yellow perch with soubise and pickled chanterelles. Next came grilled county lamb with sweet corn succotash by Michael Potters of Harvest Restaurant in Picton, Ont. Michael Stadtlander's Eigensinn Farm piglet roasted with pine wood won for presentation - who else could pull off serving a meal on a chunk of tree bark? Hiro Yoshida of Toronto's Hiro Sushi restaurant served up a trio of sushi, and then Ryan Crawford from Niagara-on-the-Lake's Stone Road Grille whipped up savoury crepes.

For dessert, we wandered over to a terrace overlooking the vineyards for a slice of peach and honey cake prepared by Jacqui Vickers of the nearby Bloomfield Carriage House Restaurant.

Picard and Hardie poured more wine. The chefs, at that point off duty, mingled with the lingering crowd. Toasts were made in honour of the organizers, the participants, the weather. It was a fitting end to a perfect dinner party. We reluctantly said our goodbyes and headed back to our waiting car like Cinderella heading for her pumpkin carriage.

"Next time, spend the night in the County," Picard said.

Next time, we will.

This year's lineup

The Wines

Huff Estates - 2 barrels of

chardonnay

Closson Chase - 1 barrel of chardonnay

Norman Hardie - 2 barrels of pinot noir

Rosehall Run Vineyards -

1 barrel of pinot noir

The Chefs

Bryan Steele - The Old Prune Restaurant

Ryan Crawford - The Stone Road Grille

Hiro Yoshida - Hiro Sushi

Michael Potters - Harvest

Restaurant

Chris McDonald - Cava

Scott Kapitan - The Bloomfield Carriage House Restaurant

Dessert

Jacqui Vickers - The Bloomfield Carriage House Restaurant

Tickets

To purchase tickets and to get

directions to Huff Estates, call Danielle Duguay at 613-393-5802 or e-mail the winery:

karan@huffestates.com.

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Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher