

WATER AND WINE

SOITY BANERJEE ENJOYS THE WINE, FOOD AND SERENITY IN
A LITTLE TOWN NOT FAR FROM THE TOURISTY NIAGARA FALLS



Vineyards at Niagara-on-the-Lake basking in the warm Ontario sun



THEN THERE'S
THE TOWN;
A TIMELESS
EXAMPLE OF
GEORGIAN
ARCHITECTURE,
A PAGEANT OF
STOREFRONTS
AND GOLF
COURSES BY
THE WATER

Grab a bag of blue and purple plums; plums that less than a day ago hung on boughs heavy with fruit, coddled by an unusually hot and long Ontario summer. Pit and slice them. Now drizzle copious quantities of maple syrup from a farm upriver and watch the deep amber coil and ribbon as it coats the plums. Spoon the fruit over the cake batter. Top with flour, brown sugar and butter 'crumbs'. Bake until golden brown. And prepare to swoon.

When you recover—revived by a glass of cold, honeyed ice wine—go thank Jane Langdon, wielder of knives, hunter-gatherer of recipes and master chef at the Wine Country Cooking School in the Strewn Winery. And as we, her five pupils for the weekend, fork into our plum platz, we too are ready to trade our family names for Escoffier, and sport whitewashed toques and OBES. A classic Russian Mennonite recipe, the platz, or what is called kuchen across the Atlantic, defines what people like Jane and her winemaker husband, Joe Will, celebrate here in the heart of the blooming wine country of Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL)—fresh local produce and the melting pot of cultures that is Canada.

Like the steady trickle of three million tourists that pour in each year, mostly from Toronto and upstate New York, I'm really here for a sniff-swirl-sip holiday. But the boutique town of NOTL on the southern edge of Ontario, barely 20 minutes from the thunderous roar of Niagara Falls, pours out a more full-bodied experience. Yes, there's plenty of surprisingly good wine (enough to wonder why Canadian vintners are not as sought after as Canadian winters). But the fine wines find an equally fine match in the extraordinary food that appears on my plate. With almost as many farm-to-fork restaurants as families in the town, one can spend an entire month without returning to the same set of tables here. Even the air smells delicious and woody—much like my fingers do after I've run them through the rosemary bush in Jane's herb garden. Then there is the town itself; a timeless example of Georgian architecture, a pageant of pretty storefronts, golf courses by the waterfront and an annual display of stagecraft at the Shaw Festival.

Queen Street at NOTL; and (left) the horseshoe Niagara Falls on the Canadian side



NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE

On the day I arrive, bells trill for 24 weddings in town. Bridesmaids and flower girls appear around every bend, fixing trails and tripping over cobblestones in pinks and lilacs, whites and mellow yellows. I trip too; running into baby strollers and curlicue benches, soaking in the sights and smells of creameries, bakeries, wine bars and hat shops on Queen Street. By the time I wind up at Kurtz's Culinary Creations, bursting with ice wine jellies and fresh honeycomb squares, like a seasoned maitre d', I can recite the bill of fare at Special Teas, Butterfly Gallery, Great Things, Corks and Just Christmas down the road.

Now, I've never had occasion to confess to a pastor. But when I was growing up, every time my Catholic friends disappeared behind the doors of the dim chapel at school, I feared the worst—lashings for every lie, rap on the knuckles for intemperance and ingestion of a whole bunch of chillies for a failed prank. So when I reach the end of the street and wander into what I imagine is the last in the line of quaint little shops, I feel a bit like my friends in the confession box. My tongue still a deep claret from the candied apple I ate, I find myself face to face with jars of worm powders, remedies for colic and money-back cure-alls for everything from baldness to tuberculosis. I'm at what was once the oldest continuously operating

The Butterfly Gallery; and (right) flower girls at NOTL



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOITY BANERJEE

pharmaceutical practice in the country (1820-1964) and is now the wonderfully restored Niagara Apothecary Museum. A place whose large Italianate windows open up a curious world of pill machines and plaster irons, lavender water and ambergris. Like most other buildings in the Old Town (once nominated to the Unesco World Heritage Site list), the Apothecary Museum is well maintained.

It's counterintuitive really, to find history that's not in ruins. History that's scoured and buffed, and embellished with pails of buttercup. The charming old clapboard and brick houses that now line the boulevards, for instance, belie the fact that the town was once ravaged and gutted in the war of 1812. Rebuilt soon after, it was originally bought by the British Loyalists for "300 suits of clothing" from the Mississauga Indians after the American Revolution. It then served as the capital of Upper Canada, until York or modern-day Toronto unseated it. Over 200 years on, bowtie-sporting, college-going Hannah drives me around town in a horse-drawn carriage. And like an old hand, she shares its past in small digestible



A busy afternoon at the touristy Clifton Hill in Niagara Falls

bites, laced heavily with trivia. She is quick to point out, for instance, that the mouth of the underground railroad in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was set right here in the Niagara region. Or that four of the town's key heritage hotels—Prince of Wales, Pillar and Post, Queen's Landing and Moffat Inn—are now co-owned by Si Wai Li, twin sister of Hong Kong-based media baron Jimmy Lai, often credited with having authored NOTL's facelift in the last few years. Later, as we clip-clop past the lakeside cottage of William Kirby, author of *The Golden Doll*, Hannah gushes about how John Travolta often holidays at the Summerset B&B across the road. Hollywood makes another appearance at the next kerb: a waterfront gazebo built for *The Dead Zone*, a thriller based on a Stephen King novel. Then a timely note about the filming of Tim Allen's *Santa Claus* and we're back on Queen Street, right outside Just Christmas, the store that's snowflaked and jinglebelled all 52 weeks of the year.

But it's when Hannah and I 'spy' around the neighbourhood that things pick up pace. She tells me how the number of windows and the size of the front yards (both taxable) were once directly proportionate to the owner's bank balance. Or how white façades (not yellow stucco or bare brick walls) and black plaques, which entitled a select few to fire-fighting services in the 19th century, set

UNTIL THE 1970S, WINE-MAKING WAS PRACTICALLY UNHEARD OF IN THE NIAGARA PENINSULA. THE REGION DEPENDED ON CANNING FRUIT

apart a rich man's mansion from a poor man's 'hovel'. Now, if only I was a burglar with a time machine! I'd have made a fortune large enough, I reckon, to afford cottages at NOTL that cost up to five million Canadian dollars today.

Later that morning, I embark on yet another journey. This time, led by my nose and not by a mare. My first stop is at Stratus, a winery that opened its doors in 2005 with the intention of creating just one white and one red assemblage wine. In-house winemaker, J.L. Groux—a man as French as a baguette—explains how assemblage is a blend that varies every season, depending on the quality of produce that year. It differs from blended wines made from the same recipe year after year and from single varietals that use only one kind of grape. So at LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified Stratus, Syrahs and Gamays, Rieslings and Gewürztraminers are mixed and matched to create complex wines in a sustainable way. Stratus also insists on traditional methods, such as picking and sorting grapes by hand, and a pump-free wine hauling system that depends on gravity. All of this seems at odds though with the winery's decidedly contemporary, high-ceilinged boutique and open terrace, where tastings, themed food and wine seminars are held all the time.

And yet, until the 1970s, winemaking was practically unheard of in the Niagara Peninsula, which includes NOTL. Back then, the region depended on canning fruit. Wedged between Lake Ontario and Erie, the Peninsula lies south of most of the Old World wine-growing areas, including Bordeaux. So the lakes, the southern latitude and the Niagara Escarpment, carved by the Niagara Falls over thousands of years, moderate the climate and help winemakers produce some of the best wines in Canada.



Clockwise from above: the contemporary wine boutique at Stratus Winery; commemorative editions of the Inniskillin Ice Wine; and oak barrels

Locals consider Donald Ziraldo and Karl Kaiser, founders of the Inniskillin Winery, pioneers of this spirited coup. But what really turned Inniskillin into royalty was its landmark win in 1989 at the Grand Prix d'Honneur at Vinexpo in France. It was the first time that the world took notice of Canadian ice wine, setting into motion the cycle of wine tourism in southern Ontario. Unlike Europe, where winemaking came long before the word tourism was coined, in the Niagara Peninsula, tourism and wine fed each other.

German in origin, ice wine is jammy and rich, usually served as a dessert wine or an aperitif. Grapes are left on the vine until frost turns them into marbles. Then when the temperature dips to -10°C, the prized gems are picked (oh so poetically) in the dead of night. And finally, their concentrated flavours are extracted and aged in oak. But what makes ice wine liquid gold is that, like saffron or truffles, it's impossible to mass-produce. So an equal quantity of grapes will yield seven bottles of white or red wine to just one precious bottle of ice wine.

But what I remember Inniskillin most for is not its wines. What lingers in my mind is the lavish lunch laid out in the vineyard on an afternoon as indulgent as the fresh-shucked oysters with mignonette ice wine. And the charred tomato soup with seared scallop,



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baby greens with crisp ice wine-smoked bacon, grilled haloumi sandwich and summer peach crisp with vanilla crème. It's like Bach on a plate. Or Niagara Falls on a full moon night.

Speaking of the Falls, I wonder why NOTL still plays second fiddle to that iconic honeymooner's den. Sure, Niagara Falls is to Canada what Elvis is to Maryland. But after five hours—on a chopper, on the *Maid of the Mist*, at the Table Rock restaurant, in a dark room where Niagara's fury is virtually simulated, in the galleys built behind the falls—even the mighty Niagara can seem tame. While I remember the childlike joy I felt when I first saw that enormous curtain of white or when I spotted a rainbow arched across its waters, once the excitement had ebbed, there was little to do but gape at it from the hotel window.

Even Clifton Hill, the main street at Niagara Falls, is geared to please only those below the age of 12. And it was packed to the gills when I went visiting on that last weekend before children in Canada went back to school. Having said that, there's something about being in a blue poncho (later recycled into baking soda) and getting up close and personal with the maw of death itself. It's the thrill of being on the edge. The thrill of watching one-fifth of the world's

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AT DINNER,
I SETTLE FOR
A HUMBLE
WORKMAN'S
POUTINE—
AN ARTERY-
CLOGGING
QUÈBÈCOIS DISH
OF FRIES, SAUCE
AND CURDS

*The Prince of Wales Hotel at NOTL; and (below)
a cookery class with Jane at the Strewn Winery*

freshwater tumbling over uncontrollably, taking with it the hundreds of daredevils in barrels and boats since 1829.

Back at NOTL that night, I have dinner at Zee's Grill on Picton Street. A humble workman's poutine—an artery-clogging, Quèbécois dish of fries served with a sticky sauce and curds—after a posh West End-like performance of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* at the Shaw Festival. Sated, I fiddle with the last of my fries. My thoughts turn to Yann Martel's protagonist, Pi Patel from *Pondicherry*. And I almost hear him say—"I love Canada. (But) I miss the heat of India, the food, the house lizards on the walls, the musicals on the silver screen, the cows wandering the streets, the crows cawing, even the talk of cricket matches..." Then I think of my 20-hour flight back to Delhi next morning. And blanch.

THE INFORMATION



At Balzac's Coffee; and (below) jars and pill boxes at the Apothecary Museum

GETTING THERE

Air India operates **direct flights** to Toronto (from Rs 56,000 return) that take about 16 hours. Jet Airways, KLM and Air Canada (among others) also fly to the Canadian capital (from Rs 50,000 return, ex-Delhi), but they all have **one-stop connections** with a flying time of 20 hours.

Amtrak (amtrak.com) and **VIA** (viarail.ca) trains that ply between the Union Station in downtown Toronto and New York, make stops at Niagara Falls and St Catherine's. Rental cars are available at both these stations for the 20-minute onward journey to Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL). Most tourists, however, prefer to do the one-and-a-half hour distance from Toronto to NOTL by car.

WHEN TO GO

Summer and fall are the most popular tourist seasons. At NOTL, these are the times when the barbecues are fired up, the cultural diary is full and the weather allows for picnics by the waterfront. This is also when the wine tourists pour in by the gallons. But even in winter, when the roads are salted to melt the snow, tourists come in droves to lend a hand in harvesting grapes,

usually a hybrid variety called vidal, for ice wine.

WHERE TO STAY

NOTL has over 200 B&Bs, hotels and private cottages. It's best to book ahead, especially if you're travelling in summer. You could stay at one of the four properties owned by the Vintage Hotels (vintage-hotels.com). We stayed at the **Prince of Wales** (from Ca\$ 329; Ca\$1=\$0.9), a chintz-and-roses type of establishment at the mouth of Queen Street. You could also check into the **Pillar and Post**, known for its spa (from Ca\$ 212), **Queen's Landing** on the waterfront (from Ca\$ 159) or **Moffat Inn**, a cosy two-storey cottage (from Ca\$ 135).

The other well-known hotels include the **Oban Inn** by the lake (from Ca\$ 150; obaninn.ca) and **Gate House Hotel** (from Ca\$ 150; gatehouse-niagara.com). For more options check the **NOTL Chamber of Commerce** website (niagaraonthelake.com), which lists rooms beginning from Ca\$75 doubles.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

• Headquarters of the British Army during the war of 1812, **Fort George** (entry Ca\$ 11.70; pc.gc.ca/fortgeorge)

was reconstructed in the 1930s. Now, it's just as famous for its historic officers' quarters and guardrooms as it is for being 'haunted' (there's even a ghost tour; admission Ca\$12 per adult). It is, however, open to the public only until the end of October.

• If you're game for a round of golf, head to the **NOTL Golf Club** (notlgolf.com) along the shoreline of Lake Ontario. The Club claims to be the oldest golf course in North America and one of the first to allow women to play.

• The **Niagara Historical Society Museum** (entry Ca\$ 5; niagarahistoricalmuseum.com) is the best place for a crash course in local history.

• Restored in 1869, the **Niagara Apothecary Museum's** (niagaraapothecary.ca) most significant exhibits are the cures (and cure-alls) current then—tinctures and crude drugs, pills and ointments—that line the shelves of the pharmacy.

• Take a walk back in time on the charming **Queen Street** lined with quaint shops that sell everything from ice wine to umbrellas. Start from the Clock Tower built to honour WWII veterans. Also, keep an eye out for smaller shops and bars tucked away in the side lanes.

• **The Shaw Festival** (shawfest.com) is NOTL's cultural drawing card. From April to November every year, works of Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries play to packed houses.

• If you can't decide which winery or wineries to pick, hop on to the local wine tour buses or vans (crushtours.com, grapeandwinetours.com), join the biking tours (zoomleisure.com) or follow

the wine route signs in your rental car. For a year-round guide, check winesofontario.ca.

WHERE TO EAT

The wine industry at NOTL has spawned a whole bunch of restaurants, many of which are in the picturesque wineries. Notable among these are the **Hillebrand Estates Winery** (hillebrand.com), **Peller Estates** (peller.com) and **Ravine Vineyard** (ravinevineyard.com)—all of which use wines as ingredients and pair their wines with each course. Locals also recommend the **Niagara Culinary Institute Restaurant** (niagara.college.ca), **Riverbend Inn & Vineyard** (riverbendinn.ca), who grow everything themselves and the **Casa Mia Ristorante** (casamiaristorante.com), the authentic Italian trattoria. For more options, see niagaraculinarytrail.com.

WHAT TO BUY

Most wineries at NOTL have boutiques that retail their wines, including ice wines, often at cut prices. Some also retail souvenirs, cookbooks and miniature ice wine bottles. For those with deeper pockets, they also have on display crystal decanters and glasses. **Inniskillin** (inniskillin.com), for instance, stocks an ice wine glass, made to order by the Austrian glassware giant, Riedel. You can also pick up reasonably priced wines at the **Liquor Control Board of Ontario** shops around town. For wine jellies go to **Kurtz Culinary Creations** (kurtzorchards.com) on Queen Street, and pick up preserves and sauces made with locally grown, organic fruits and vegetables at **Greaves Jams & Marmalades** (greavesjams.com) across the road.

TOP TIP

Across the road from the Prince of Wales Hotel sits the bright yellow building of **Balzac's Coffee** (balzacs.com). It used to be the station for electric streetcars connecting NOTL with St Catherine's, but now serves culture in a cup. So ask for the Atwood Blend: a mild coffee that uses bird-friendly shade-grown coffee to encourage preservation of migratory birds. Canadian author and bird-lover Margaret Atwood has blessed the project herself. Proceeds from the sales go to the Pelee Island Bird Observatory.

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