

LABOUR DAY was begun a century and a half ago by disgruntled tradesmen in Australia, far removed in so many ways from the Czech master masons helping build an immigrant's Townships winery

# Old World dreams, craftsmanship

JEFF HEINRICH THE GAZETTE

**GLENN SUTTON** – It's Labour Day today, but this story isn't about unions.

It's about the trades, and about an immigrant's dream, and about how craftsmen – whose New World forefathers started the labour movement 150 years ago – are making that dream bear fruit in the hills of Eastern Townships.

The setting is Chapelle Ste. Agnès, a magnificent estate of terraced vineyards and Old World architecture near Sutton, owned and run by a Westmount antiques dealer and her viticulturist son.

Ice wine is the specialty of this property on the Vermont border, 120 kilometres southeast of Montreal.

But just as special is what sustains it: the landscape and buildings, designed, crafted and still being toiled over by artisans from France and the Czech Republic.

There's a Romanesque-style chapel, two well-decorated villas, a network of vault-ceilinged wine cellars going four flights down to the bedrock, a heart-shaped trout pond, a one-room cottage painted to look like a medieval royal military tent and an Austrian-style weinstube (wine bar) whose centrepiece is a big ceramic-tiled oven.

There's also the foundation and underground staircase of a future château (so far unbuilt) and next to it a solarium and a reception hall (under construction).

And most of it – the heart of it – is put together piece-by-piece by human hands.

"This is the stuff that dreams are made on, and if I live to be 120, I'll finish it all," said owner Henrietta Antony, 75, only half-joking, during a tour of the grounds.

"Why do I do it? Because I'm pining for the solidity of what I grew up in, before I was torn from my milieu."

Born and raised in southern Moravia, Antony fled the communists after the Second World War to come to Canada. She started an antiques business in 1959, and 10 years ago began investing the profits into her new project, the vineyard, with her eldest son, John, and their winemaking consultant, Christian Barthomeuf.

The result of their 7,000-vine venture has been a critical success.

At last fall's International Wine and Spirits Competition, in London, judges named the vineyard's 2002 Gewürztraminer icewine the best in its class in the world. Another of its vintage varietals, the 2002 Vidal Geisenheim icewine, won bronze. The prestigious event was the vineyard's first competition.

Not that you're likely to have seen or tasted any of it – the wines are hard to find in Quebec.

Independent, hard-working and strong-willed, the Antonys have steered clear of the government's distribution network controlled by the Société des alcools du Québec. Instead, they sell their wines at the vineyard itself and, since Aug. 1, at the Marché des Saveurs in the Jean Talon Market.

With that limited availability, plus its own physical situation behind walls and gates and a policy of by-appointment-only visits, the estate is partly to blame for cultivating a style of exclusivity that has kept it far from the public eye.

But that's something the Antonys now hope to change. This summer, they started allowing passersby in for impromptu tours of the estate on Sunday afternoons.

And next year, they plan to open the reception hall and solarium for business.

Now used only for the occasional wedding and catered party, the grounds and buildings could be rented out for small



**Master mason on the job:** Czech craftsman Josef Mrkva is hard at work at Chapelle Ste. Agnès, a stunning estate of terraced vineyards and Old World architecture near Sutton. Mrkva and his son are specialists in vaulted ceilings, a kind of architecture that is standard in underground wine cellars in Europe but unknown here.

PHOTOS: ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

conferences and corporate events, they hope.

And that's where the tradesmen come in. Without their ideas and their labour, the dream won't become reality.

There are now two of them working on the estate. They're a father-and-son team, Josef and Petr Mrkva, both master masons from Dolní Bojanovice, a village in southern Moravia about 100 kilometres north of Vienna.

Their specialty is vaulted ceilings made of brick, a kind of architecture that is standard in underground wine cellars back home but virtually unknown here.

Josef Mrkva is 53, a sturdy man whose countenance is marred by a missing bridge of lower teeth and a



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gash, recently begun to heal, on his bare upper brow. The son, 21, has tattoos across his arms, a silver earring, peroxide-blond hair and – as if to balance the impression – a rather shy smile and a polite demeanour.

Antony hired the Mrkvas – both of them, unilingual Czechs – because she couldn't find anyone in Quebec to do the job.

"I bemoan the fact that in Canada we don't have proper schools for these kinds of trades," Antony said.

"If I told a local bricklayer I wanted a vaulted ceiling, they wouldn't know what I'm talking about. Maybe there's an Italian or a Portuguese one who knows, but just try finding one in this province – it's impossible."

Brought here on six-month work visas in April, the Mrkvas aren't part of any union. They're part of something older and more storied: the fraternity of masons. And on this of all days, that's appropriate.

Labour Day, after all, began as a tradition of the trades, an annual march begun by disgruntled stonemasons in Australia in the mid-19th century, who put down their tools in Victoria to push for a shorter, eight-hour work day – a milestone, so to speak, in the labour movement.

Antony is wary of unions. "When I first came to Canada, I worked 72-hour weeks and didn't complain," she said.

That's why she likes hiring foreign craftsmen. They name their own terms, as entrepreneurs, like she does in her business.

"Unions – they want their pound of flesh," she said. "But I respect people.

They aren't dumb. They can negotiate for themselves."

She also finds the foreigners more flexible. A necessary quality, too, for as often happens on construction projects, the Mrkvas' assignment this summer changed en route.

They thought they were coming to build the thing that's made their reputation back home – a brick rotunda – in

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the cellars of the château. Because of production delays, they were put to work helping build the reception hall and solarium.

With techniques learned over three generations in the family, they crafted Roman arches out of brick, laid staircases out of Indiana limestone and created a fan-pattern terrace out of small blocks of rough-cut grey granite – 60 tonnes of it – imported from the Czech Republic.

The Mrkvas worked alongside unionized Quebec labourers, men whose jobs pouring concrete, placing steel beams and welding metal joints placed them more in the New World tradition of construction than the one the Czechs were used to in their homeland.

"We've worked on construction sites outside the Czech Republic before – in Germany, in Austria," Josef said in Czech, taking a break from the sun at a

patio table outside Antony's villa, where he and his son are billeted.

"This place is more like home. We're here on a vineyard, and we're working on something we know," he said.

There are other advantages. Foreign jobs are better paying – Josef and Petr can earn double outside the Czech Republic than in it. And they have more spare time here.

This summer they visited Toronto, Niagara Falls and Montreal and enjoyed long nature walks around the green hills of Sutton and the Missisquoi River valley where their biggest pleasure was seeing "exotic" creatures like porcupines – unthinkable in central Europe.

Father, like son, hopes this won't be their last time in this country.

"We'd like to come back next summer and build that rotunda," Josef said wistfully, proudly proffering four well-worn snapshots of similar rotundas he built in Moravia, as if showing his CV.

"I guess that will have to wait," he said. "There's other work to do."

For more on **Chapelle Ste. Agnès**, go to [www.vindeglace.com](http://www.vindeglace.com). Tours of the vineyard (eight people minimum) can be booked by calling John Antony at 450-538-0303 or emailing him at [john.antony@b2b2c.ca](mailto:john.antony@b2b2c.ca). Individuals and couples can drop in Sundays at 1:30 p.m. for impromptu tours (again, maximum eight people at a time). Bottles of icewine cost between \$50 and \$150, and are sold on-site or in Montreal at the Jean Talon Market.

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## OPEN/CLOSED

# Lights will be dim in banks and government offices; no day off for parking meters

Many businesses and government services will be closed or operate on different hours today, Labour Day. Here is a partial list of those affected:

**All banks** will be closed.

**All federal and provincial government offices** will be closed.

**Most city of Montreal departments**, including Access Montreal offices, will be closed. Many services in other municipalities are reduced; consult your borough for details.

**Parking meters** will remain in operation.

**There will be regular garbage and**

**curbside recycling in Montreal**, but some boroughs have cancelled large-item pickup.

**Montreal Municipal Court**, at 775 Gosford St., will be closed.

**Most supermarkets** will be open; operating hours may vary. **Retail store hours** will vary.

All **Société des alcools du Québec** stores will be on a Sunday schedule, unless the outlet is normally closed on Sundays or is in a shopping centre that is closed.

The **Biodôme, the Botanical Garden** and the **Insectarium** will be open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The **Planetarium** will be open 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.,

with shows at 1:15 and 3:45 in French and 2:30 p.m. in English. The **Pointe à Callière museum of archeology** will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The **Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal** will be open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The **Montreal Museum of Fine Arts** will be closed.

**Bonsecours Market** (350 St. Paul St. E.) will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The **Atwater, Jean Talon, Maisonneuve** and **Lachine** public markets will be open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Montreal **arenas, swimming pools, sports centres, libraries** and **cultural venues** will operate according to schedules set by the boroughs. For

information, check with the venue or confirm schedules in each borough at [www.ville.montreal.qc.ca](http://www.ville.montreal.qc.ca)

**In Laval**, most municipal services are closed. Garbage and recycling pickup will occur on a normal schedule. The municipal impound lot will be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The community relations line at 450-978-8000 will be staffed from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The construction and demolition debris sites at 1527 Cunard St. and 5500 Dagenais Blvd. W. will be open from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. A list of services is available at [www.ville.laval.qc.ca](http://www.ville.laval.qc.ca)

**Montreal Transit Corp.** buses will operate on a holiday schedule. Métro trains will run on a Sunday schedule.

Call 514-786-4636 or go to [www.stm.info](http://www.stm.info) for information.

The Metropolitan Transit Agency will operate the **Montreal/Dorion-Rigaud** and **Montreal/Deux Montagnes** commuter trains on a Sunday schedule. There will be no service on the **Montreal/Blainville-St. Jérôme, Montreal/Mont St. Hilaire** or **Montreal/Delton-Candiac** lines. Ticket booths downtown and at Angrignon and Radisson métro stations will be closed. Ticket booths at Cartier and Montmorency métro stations in Laval will be open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Longueuil booth will be open from 5:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The Le Carrefour booth will be open from 6:15 to 11:15 a.m., and 1:15 to 6:15

p.m. Call 514-287-8726 or visit the website [www.amt.qc.ca](http://www.amt.qc.ca) for more information.

**Laval Transit Corp.** buses will operate on a Sunday schedule.

**In Longueuil**, buses will operate on a Sunday schedule, but the T48 bus will maintain its regular weekday schedule.

There will be **no regular collection or delivery of mail**. Post offices will be closed. Privately owned retail postal outlets will be open according to the operating hours of those businesses.

**The Montreal Exchange** and the **Toronto Stock Exchange** will be closed.