



STORY BY **Chuck Byers** PHOTOS COURTESY OF **Troycom**

WHAT IS IT ABOUT LA BELLE PROVENCE that makes Quebec such an inviting place to visit? Is it the 400 years of history and culture? The culinary talents of chefs including, Canada's top Executive Chef Jean Soulard who keeps a private herbal garden, bee hives and chicken coops atop Quebec City's Chateau Frontenac? Is it the scenery? Or, is it the wine?

Jacques Cartier couldn't have guessed the end result when he first eyed the multitude of grapes growing on an island in the St. Lawrence River which he named Ile de Bacchus. Later changing the name to Ile d'Orleans, he had no idea that the Sacramental wine made by the Jesuits from native grapes was the precursor of several great wine making regions.

Despite major climatic challenges, Quebec has developed several wine regions among which are Ile d'Orleans, Eastern Townships and Laurentians. Topographically different from each other, each makes unique wines.

The contrast between the agricultural Ile d'Orleans and Quebec City — with its cobblestone streets, endless eateries, superb hotels and busy markets — is stark. The island is located across the St. Lawrence River almost opposite Quebec City. From the suspension bridge, Le Pont

De L'île which connects the island to the mainland, can be seen Montmorency Falls an impressive 275-foot high waterfall, some 98 feet higher than Niagara Falls.

L'île d'Orleans was once referred to as the "Island of Sorcerers" by mainlanders who saw lights hovering above the water. In reality, it was poachers using lights to get around. Rumours abounded and the legend was born.

This scenic isle is a hub of agricultural treasures. Here, new technology combines with old world knowledge to produce some of the finest fruits, berries, plants, vines anywhere. Specialties include old-style French cheese and smoked sturgeon.

The local architecture reflects cultural influences. Many of the cottages, built after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, are of British design with other brightly coloured houses and roofs being patterned after the houses found in France.

Its wineries are rustic and very appealing to the eye. They seem to meld with the topographic features of the island, becoming part of it rather than a separate entity. They foster unification with nature where one can see bald eagles nesting not far from the vineyards. Most are organic and very innovative using winter hardy grape varieties specifically developed for the harsh island winters where actual temperatures can descend to -35 degrees Celsius. While familiar vines such as: Baco Noir, Marechal Foch, Muscat and Vidal are grown, hardier varieties such as the St-Croix, Sabrevois, Frontenac, Russian Michurinetz, Vandal-Cliché seem to be the workhorse vines in this area. Wines can be dry crispy white, robust red or sweet.

Each winery has a story to tell. Domaine De La Source a Marguerite, whose owner, Conrad Brilliant, stands tall, looking defiantly Stoic in his black Stetson, rugged work clothes and boots, is named after a nun who miraculously discovered a spring flowing on this property during a time of extreme drought. Vignoble Ste Petronille is named after a Roman martyr and has the outstanding view of its vines stretching out to the St. Lawrence. Bernard Monna, an artist, combines his paintings, sculptures and pottery with the making of first rate Black Currant Wine and Crème de Cassis.

Some families such as the Turcottes of

Vignoble du Matin have been on the island since the 16th Century. The first mill built on the island, Cidrerie Verger Bilodeau, makes a wide variety of apple pies and wines, ciders a unique "Champagne style" cider.

Eastern Townships

With its many lakes, rivers and hills this area resembles neighbouring Vermont. Travelling throughout this area is like taking a page out of a Washington Irving story complete with covered bridges, winding roads and quiet forested areas. There seems to be an adventure at every turn. The towns are small and very inviting and the people are superb. Gourmets will find the food fare excellent and those wanting to visit wineries and taste wine will get their fill!

The Eastern Townships are to Quebec what Niagara is to Ontario. Technology and terroir meld to produce some very fine products. The wineries are varied with many specializing in certain styles of wine. Here, the grape varieties are made up of mainly vinifera hybrids with some pure vinifera thrown in.

The importance of wine to this area is exhibited by festivals such as the Fetes du Vendages which takes place in a lovely Magog located on the shores of Lake Memphremagog. In an atmosphere reminiscent of a County Fair, fifty wineries gather to exhibit their wares. Other exhibits include, grape stomping, cafes and art.

Winery names are unique. Vignoble Cep d'Argent literally means "Vine of Silver" referring to the silver reflective glow that the vines seem to receive from the neighbouring lake. Domaine L'Orpailleur is named symbolically after the gold that prospectors found in many of the rivers nearby. Another winery is named after what it was supposed to be: a place for Wild Boars hence the name Vignoble de la Bauge. The winery now has a large menagerie of animals that entertain onlookers while they learn about wine.

Chapelle Ste-Agnes specializes in sweet wines and gives onlookers an eyeful. This Romanesque chapel designed in traditional field stone construction sits amidst the splendor of the green mountains of Appalachia. A medieval looking wine cellar, 20 feet below the chapel, houses antique »



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The Chapelle Ste Agnès was built in 1993 by Henrietta Antony, a Montreal antique dealer. It was Mrs. Antony's intent to build a timeless structure of great beauty that would elevate the spirit and bring peace to passers-by.



religious artifacts.

From the chapel, one can view high-rolling hills carpeted with trees as far as the eye can see. Seventeenth Century Louis the XIII doors lead people outside to the terraced vineyards.

Eighteen terraces one atop of the other are supported by stone walls. At the bottom are two ponds which, together with the walls create a micro-climate that extends the season enough for the vinifera and hybrid vines to ripen and develop the sugar needed for wine production.

Two other wineries that special in sweet wines are the splendid Domaine Pinnacle which makes Iced Apple Wine and Clos Saganat which is totally organic and biodynamic.

The Eastern Townships make more than just wine however. At the magnificently beautiful monastery, Abbaye de St. Benoit-du-Lac, Blue Cheese is made while Fitch Bay houses, Bleu Lavande, the largest lavender farm in Canada.

The Lower Laurentian Region

About two hours north of the Eastern Townships the Lower Laurentian Region is a relatively level topography. The vines are similar to the previous area with some minor differences.

At Aux Cassis D'Argenteuil, black currants are grown on a 32 acre farm and produce a variety of fortified wines which are very high in antioxidants. The wines of Vignoble des Negondos are more traditional with some amazing Rosé wine as well as Port style just made for chocolate.

Another winery owned by politician, Jean Pierre Belisle is truly a masterpiece of planning and care. At Vignoble la Roche des Brise, a computerized weather/seasonal warning system that is run via satellite with a home base in Austria has been installed. The system warns of temperature fluctuations and potential harms allowing vineyards to begin preparing for such things as frost. The results speak for themselves with exceptionally healthy vines producing many winning vintages.

There is much more in this area than just the wineries, however. At Intermiel, honey wine, a Royal Jelly and other products are produced all from fully functioning beehives that can be viewed within the premises.

A non-profit venture called Angelica is another great agro-touristic initiative. A 94-acre theme park features garden settings such as: English Country Garden, Fairy Garden, Bird Garden, Classical Viennese Garden and a superb Zen Garden complete with waterfalls, ponds and statues of Buddha.

Quebec's wine regions are serious about the quality coming out of their vineyards. In 1987, the Association des Vignerons du Quebec was formed as well as a special "Vin du Quebec" certification guaranteeing origin. Some of the grapes may be different but when it is all said and done, if you combine superb atmosphere and wine, what else does one need? 🍷