

# TOP DROP

## Norman Hardie Finds Perfection by Blending Two Ontario Regions

BY CHRISTOPHER WATERS

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There isn't a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in Ontario wine country; there's a \$70 bottle of Pinot Noir. That's certainly the sense you get when you hear Norman Hardie discuss the release of his first Cuvée L Pinot Noir this summer.

The 2007 vintage wine is a blend of Hardie's Pinots from Prince Edward County and the Niagara Peninsula. Three hundred cases were produced from a vintage that is being hailed as the best ever in Ontario. Its price is set at \$69 per bottle. Steep, yes. But it's comparable to the price of similarly ambitious wines from top Pinot Noir producers in Oregon, California and Central Otago in New Zealand. Compared to the price of similar-quality red Burgundy, it's a steal.

"I do think it is the best one to date," explains Hardie, who christened his top bottling Cuvée L after the first initial of his late sister. "We have captured the best of two different factors. The sum of the parts is better than the whole.

"Cuvée L will only come out in the best vintages for the varietal," he continues. "The Pinot was made in 2007, which was very much a Pinot vintage. We won't make a Cuvée L Pinot in 2008. I know that right now. It's not there. The Pinots are good, as good as 2006, maybe a hair above."

The 2008 vintage, however, should see the first production of a Cuvée L Chardonnay. "It's definitely a Chardonnay year," Hardie says.

As a vintner with feet in two different growing areas in Ontario, Hardie has spent the past five vintages exploring and exposing the differences between fruit from

vineyards surrounding his winery in the County's Wellington township and fruit purchased from selected sites in Niagara. During the growing season, Hardie piles the kilometres on to his vehicle, racing back and forth between the two wine regions. He needs to see and taste the fruit to ascertain the perfect opportunity to pick.

The quality of the 2007 harvest was such that he knew he could raise the bar with a "reserve" bottling of Pinot Noir; the only question was how to find that top wine. Hardie explains he avoided simply honing in on the best barrels in his cellar for fear of harming his two appellations wines.

"The difficulty in cherry picking your barrels is your other bottlings. In this case, my Niagara Pinot and County Pinot might suffer as a result," he says. "The County and the Niagara Pinots always have to be very strong. They will never suffer to make the Cuvée L. We're not sacrificing to make a showcase wine."

Hardie credits two inspirations for blending his two Pinots together. The first was a mentor from Hardie's early explorations of winemaking. Jim Clendenen, of Au Bon Climat Winery in Santa Barbara, California, blends barrels from his top vineyards to create his Pinot Noir Isabelle, a wine that often offers more depth of flavour and complexity than his vineyard-specific bottlings.

The second was a friend from home: Thomas Bachelder, of Niagara's Le Clos Jordanne. "After tasting through the barrels in the cellar, Thomas told me, 'It's a unique opportunity to do something different.'

"We have two palettes of colours. Finding

the right balance and tweaking through a little more barrel age has made something even better. We have the possibility to do it, so why not do it?"

The finished blend is 60 per cent Niagara and 40 per cent County. "You get the weight from the heavy clay soils and the vine age from the Niagara portion and the minerality and finesse from the County," says Hardie, who attempted extensive blending trials to find the right balance.

"With Pinot, it's all nuance," he states. "I think it has worked out well. There is this lovely definition, firmness, tightness, all the way through the wine.

"This is not a glossy wine. For me, that would be the worst compliment, that it's glossy."

Hardie's top wine was given more time in barrel so that the two components could come together and integrate. It was still in barrel in February at the time of this writing. He explains that he tastes the barrels obsessively these days, monitoring how the wine is evolving. He knows the potential of the wine he has, and wants desperately to get the full expression into the bottle.

"As soon as I think it's there, we're going to yank it out of barrel," Hardie says. "We're not going to filter if we don't have to.

"It's about making great wine," the passionate vintner continues. "That's what it comes down to."

Hardie sees the success of the wine as another endorsement of Pinot Noir's suitability in Ontario. "I think 2007 was a revelation for us and I think the quality of the 2008s, given the difficulty of the vintage, gives us a great future with this variety," he says. "There's no question, with Pinot, the amount of time spent in the vineyard makes a huge difference. Where there are great growing conditions, in a great year or bad year, we will always have the opportunity to make something remarkable."

Going forward, Hardie says he expects the Cuvée L Pinot Noir to be a moving target. "It will change as vine age changes," he says. "The goal is to consistently make something in this style. In the years we can do it, we'll do it. In the years we can't, we just won't do it.

"It is going to be interesting to watch as the years go along. The proportions will change — some years there will be more County; some years there will be more Niagara. But it will always be a blend of the two. You have two different terroirs which both bring great elements."

Hardie expects to release the Cuvée L Pinot Noir in June. More information about the wine and its availability is available online at [www.normanhardie.com](http://www.normanhardie.com) or by calling 613-399-5297. **kl**

## Tastes of 2007



### Norman Hardie Wines 2007 Cuvée L Pinot Noir

Ontario \$69

Tasted from barrel, this super cuvée shows outstanding potential. It has a luscious core of fruit that is kept in check by bright acidity and obvious minerality. It's beyond impressive. I'm looking forward to seeing it in bottle and marvelling at it in my glass. In the meantime, I'm content to sip Hardie's remarkable 2007 County Pinot Noir, which sells for \$35 per bottle. [normanhardie.com](http://normanhardie.com)



### Rosehall Run Vineyards 2007 Cuvée County Pinot Noir

Prince Edward County \$18.95

Winemaker Dan Sullivan has launched Cuvée County, a new label to celebrate the bounty of Prince Edward County fruit available from the 2007 vintage. The Cuvée County Pinot Noir is a blend of barrel and stainless steel tank-aged wine, which keeps the price of this fruity and spicy red affordable. [rosehallrun.com](http://rosehallrun.com)



### Vineland Estates Winery 2007 Non-oaked Chardonnay

Niagara Peninsula \$12.85 (669374)

Often times, unoaked Chardonnays can be tweaked to be overly tropical or perfumed — products that call to mind candied bananas or Juicy Fruit gum more than white wine. This is a more honest expression of the grape, with textbook apple and citrus notes. Winemaker Brian Schmidt has worked to develop a nice creamy texture in this wine, another trait of a well-made Chardonnay. Good value. [vineland.com](http://vineland.com)