



Quebec's wine country ripens

Attention-getting bottles are emerging from the Eastern Townships, where wines pair nicely with country pleasures.

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REPORTING FROM
FARNHAM, CANADA

There had already been three years of failed harvests. Three straight years of weeding, planting, pruning, every day, into every night, on every weekend, with only the prospect of more work and an uncertain future, by the time Véronique Hupin and Mike Marler made the decision never to quit, no matter the cost.

The tally was \$200,000 and rising — far more than their life savings, which they dropped in the summer of 1999 on a tiny vineyard called Les Pervenches, near Farnham in Quebec's Eastern Townships.

The previous owner, a Frenchman, had the crazy idea to plant Chardonnay. Chardonnay! Possibly the least hardy grape. Temperature-sensitive in the extreme — like setting a duckling down in the Arctic. It was their plan too.

"The old man warned us just to rip out the Chard and start over," recalls Hupin, as we sat on unvarnished chairs facing the couple's 3 acres of vines. "You put so much work in, and nothing's happening. Finally we said, 'Let's buy whatever, do whatever.' This was our dream, to be home in Quebec and make wine; we had to try everything."

And so, after 11 hard-fought seasons, Hupin and Marler still produce Quebec's only Chardonnay — though their fortunes have changed. The couple, who hail from small towns near Montreal, are routinely singled out among the province's top two or three winemakers.

Now the only way to sample their certified organic and biodynamic Chards is to find someone with a coveted stash: Vintages sell out to a few loyal customers — sommeliers, mostly, and a few celebrities such as Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones — months before they are bottled. Their latest experiment, a sparkling Chardonnay that is another first for Quebec this season, was uncorked just weeks ago and is sold out.

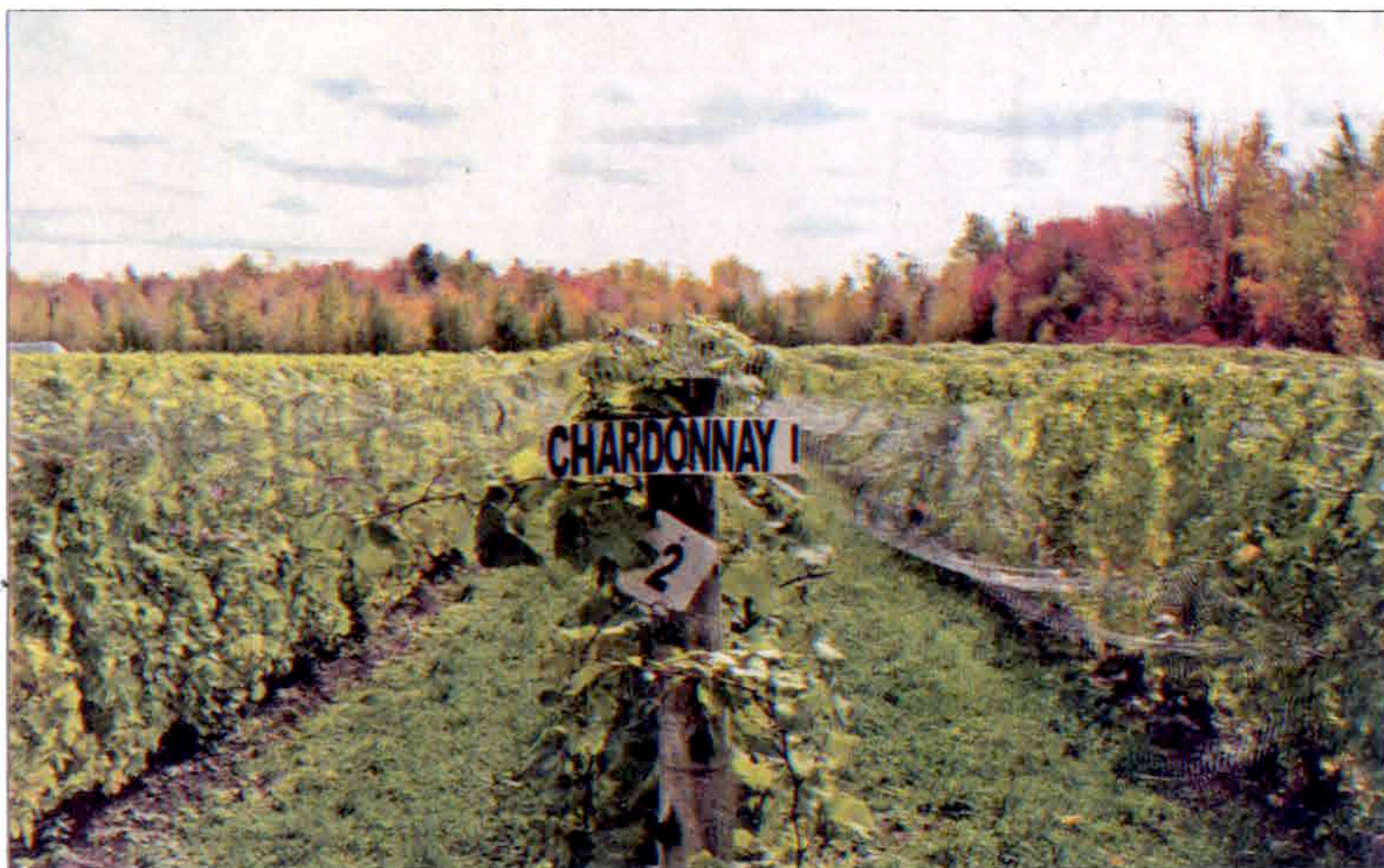
Failing a restaurant connection, you can drive to Les Pervenches, as tourists have begun to do. Twin silos at a crossroads and a book-sized blue sign depicting grapes on a vine are the winery's sole road markers. It figures.

Although small wineries have been in production here sporadically since at least the 1860s, the official Route des Vins de Brome-Missisquoi was organized in only 2003 by the Quebec Winegrowers Assn.

The glossy foldout map handed to me at Les Pervenches describes 17 wineries along Quebec's wine route: a self-guided drive (or bicycle ride, as some choose to do it) that starts 37 miles southeast of Montreal and continues for 82 miles of country roads weaving through Brome-Missisquoi, a sort of politically defined voting region.

We were driving through all the oldest of the Eastern Townships, farm communities threaded like beads along the border with Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, which were established by mainly English-speaking immigrants in the late 18th century. This is the heart of minority Anglo history and culture in Quebec. And despite its whispered reputation as the next Canadian wine and culinary tourism must-see, this isn't a place accustomed to drawing attention to itself.

Few Quebecers, in fact, know that there are 84 wineries across the province, out of 400 in Canada, which makes Quebec the third-largest wine region in the country (after Ontario next door and temperate British Columbia on the Pacific coast).



CHRISTOPHER HELDT

CLUSTERED: Les Pervenches, on the Route des Vins de Brome-Missisquoi, is known for its Chardonnay. Seventeen wineries are listed along this route through the Eastern Townships of Quebec, close to the borders of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.



THOMAS FARRER/TOWNSHIPS

COUNTRY CHARMS: The drive through Quebec's Eastern Townships lets tourists sample serene countryside and some of the best wines from the region, and still be in Montreal by nightfall.



Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas

PAUL DROINSKI/LOS ANGELES TIMES

My unofficial guides to *la route* were Cory Ciona and Guy Bourbonnière, co-founders of the Quebec-focused wine agent Les Fils de Bacchus and co-authors of a tasting guide to Canadian wines due out later this year. I had driven in from Montreal, a wine novice on my inaugural mosey through the Eastern Townships.

I let each mouthful of red or white linger before taking turns with the others spitting into an oversize plastic grape-gathering bucket. And by the final spits —

OK, sips, I was still getting the hang of this wine route thing — I was plotting how to score some bottles next year. And wondering how, after a decade of living relatively close by, I was only just now discovering the townships.

Leaving Les Pervenches, our trio followed successive gravel roads wending past burnt-straw-colored fields; past Anglican, Methodist and Catholic one-room churches, covered bridges and old sawmills; past Victorian red-brick and whitewashed clapboard vil-



TOURISM EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

HISTORIC: The 19th century Nesbitt House is in Cowansville, along the wine route.

lages whose names recall their distinctly un-French-Canadian past: Dunham, Farnham, Frelighsburg, Foster, Knowlton.

Dunham — the first township, established in 1796 — and Frelighsburg are for the epicure. Knowlton is known for its antiques dealer. Tourists can visit the best wineries — Les Pervenches, Val Caudalies and the second oldest one in the region, l'Orpailleur — and be in Montreal, the largest and closest city, by nightfall. Or they can finish the official wine route of townships within

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Go online for more photos of Quebec wine country.

Brome-Missisquoi and venture through the rest of the Eastern Townships, staying at B&Bs and lakeside inns, and sampling not only wine and ice cider (depending on the season) but also artisanal cheese, chocolate, honey, duck and foie gras, and classic French Canadian sugar pie, *tarte au sucre*.

There was barely a car to cross paths with on the road to Frelighsburg, where we paused for a late lunch at a pizzeria-cum-convenience store. Paired with a decent "all dressed" — Quebecois French slang for a pizza with everything on it — we ordered Val Caudalies Vidal Demi-Sec 2008, another hard-to-find vintage at even the best restaurants. It's made 90 minutes away.

We decided to see the vineyard for ourselves. Val Caudalies' 100 acres were purchased in 2004 by three partners — friends since high school near Montreal — and expanded from what had been an apple orchard. Now there are 20,000 grape vines and a winery open year-round for tastings, picnics, weddings and outdoor activities along miles of forested trails.

In his well-appointed showroom converted from an old red barn, co-owner Guillaume Leroux poured us a late-harvest white made with Vidal grapes — a traditional Quebecois hybrid varietal — and explained that a decade ago the wine route drew 50,000 people a year; today it's 400,000, with about 18,000 visitors to Val Caudalies alone.

Although most people arrive in the spring and summer, winter tourism is sharply increasing. Leroux said, the result of recent efforts by the Eastern Townships to promote wines and ciders for every season. In winter, visitors to Val Caudalies can hike, cross-country ski and snowshoe for a few hours, then head indoors to taste wines and observe how the late-harvest vintage is made, all free of charge.

"For me, it's natural to take what the *terroir* gives us; to use what defines us," the young vintner explained, as his wife, Arianne, and 2-year-old son, Thomas, arrived to help him close the store for the evening. "You have the outdoors here, small-town friendliness, good food, good wine."

"There's so much *plaisir de la vie*."

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