

BLACK PRINCE WINERY

The Cooperative Spirit

A

BY ASTRID YOUNG

As Prince Edward County's wineries grow into their rubber boots, there is and always has been an anchor in their midst, a central Cooperative: Black Prince Winery. Located just outside of Picton in Prince Edward County (PEC), the winery sits amidst other businesses and homes along the Parkway. A medieval theme runs throughout the retail space commemorating the Black Prince himself, Prince Edward (1330-1376). Visitors can wander out onto the raised deck with their wine and enjoy the view of the vineyards.

In the centuries old tradition of well-established regions such as Barbaresco (Italy) and the Côtes du Rhône (France), Black Prince has also focused its attention on the small wine growers that have come to the County to realize a dream. It is truly the spirit of cooperation that has made it possible for Black Prince to exist, and most importantly, for small growers to flourish in spite of limited finances and inclement weather.

Black Prince Winery seems to be everything to everyone who wants to take advantage of what they offer. They are the poster child of rural diversity. They custom crush grapes, provide retail sales and marketing, sell home winemaking supplies, craft restaurant house-wines, rent out state-of-the-art wine-making equipment, consult, grape grow, host events and are charitable donors. They are a Cooperative in every sense of the word. This facility has evolved over many years with the 'wine by design' program, which provides house-wine making services for banquet halls, restaurants and event facilities.

Over the pulsing rhythm of a mobile bottling line, brought in to bottle, label and package some of his clients' finished product, I spoke to Black Prince's Chief of Operations, Geoff Webb about how he ended up here and how filling a need has fostered a community of commitment and growth.

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From
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Black Prince
Winery offers local
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in a myriad
of ways

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The winery was founded by a group of members of the Canadian Opimian Society, a non-profit national wine society whose members co-operatively purchase wines. This apparently is only part of their story.

In the late seventies, a group of Opimians invested in vineyards and wineries in California - a good place to be at that time, when real estate was still reasonable in Napa Valley, and it was still possible to see a profit. But in 2000, their attention came back to Canada.

At the time Geoff Webb was involved in purchasing and selling bulk wine from all over the world, and was in a position to convince the investment group that they should invest in Canada. What was to become a cooperative venture actually began as one of sorts. A group of Opimian members, Webb and some colleagues invested.

When seeking out a winery location in Niagara became too cost prohibitive, (even then), Prince Edward County looked promising at about one tenth of the cost of land, and was new enough that the partners felt that they could come in as a cooperative, and be of service to, as opposed to compete with, the various growers who were just starting to plant their plots.

"We figured we couldn't exactly go into an established

region and say, 'We're a cooperative, here we are', when people have been here for a while and already have their allegiances in place," says Webb.

"That said, being a Cooperative winery was in the original business plan and we had no shortage of talent. We all had a background in wine to a certain degree, in both marketing and sales. We also had Michael Fallow as a consulting winemaker, who John Sambrook, (a founding partner and former president of the Opimian Society had known for about twenty-five years. Sambrook retired from his position at the Opimian Society)

to focus on building Black Prince, which we really appreciate, because we're in a huge growth phase right now. It's kind of 'all hands on deck' so to speak," says Webb.

The cooperative that is Black Prince assists local growers in a myriad of ways. For some, it is a place to sell their grapes. For others, it is a place where they can make their wine without having to invest a large fortune in building a winery or purchasing the necessary equipment. And for others, Black



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Prince will actually process the wine for them from crush to bottle, or merely help matters along for those without experience who just want to take their grapes to the next level.

"We started with three growers. We are working with about nine entities right now, and are flexible enough to help each one grow as a collective unit, lending our expertise where we are needed," says Webb.

Growers include Dan Taylor of Domaine Calcaire, whose single

vineyard Pinot Noirs are marketed and sold through Black Prince's retail outlet, as well as DelGatto Estates with their Bella Vineyards label. Sandbanks Winery, headed by Catherine Langlois uses the facilities, the Amateur Winemakers Association of Ontario (P.E.C. division), County Estate Winery (a division of County Cider Co.), and a handful of others all work with Black Prince. But as vineyards mature, and the future looms, where does that leave Black Prince?

"I think there's going to be a time in the future where we will be primarily cooperative. I think some of these growers who aspire to having and building wineries will find out that they can't for whatever reason. Maybe it just didn't work, they weren't able to raise enough money, or they aren't able to realize that dream on their own. And then that aspect of our business will be more important. It's one of those things we identified as we were planning our business and as it's been growing we're seeing more and more how important it

'Okay, I'll take your grapes, I'll make your wine, give me your cheque and don't come back.' It's a funny attitude. They have a very specific way of doing things, very set-in-stone, and maybe they don't want to be bumping into people at 3 o'clock in the morning like I sometimes do here. Depending on who they are, we allow people to do their own thing here. We're pretty open about that and some wineries can't really host that kind of business."

Looking around the tasting room, there are lots of indications of a pride in terroir. Single vineyard efforts are in evidence, as well as blended wines.

"At Black Prince you can buy 100% local wine, you can buy wine that's been blended with Niagara fruit, or you can buy 100% non-County. For instance, last year we had a short crop which allowed us to bring in fruit from outside the country - we have to identify on the label that it is an imported product - it says 'cellared in Canada from imported and domestic grapes'. It's that specific," says Webb.

Black Prince is also the home of one of Canada's few Reverse Osmosis machines, a

really a leap as much as a segue - and it's a relatively new venture which we have yet to launch officially. In experimenting and figuring out what could be done, one of the things we found is that we could successfully concentrate juice without having to heat it. This is a huge advantage to home winemakers, because you lose that candied, stale aspect that we associate with 'kit' wines that is due to the pasteurization (heating) of the juice to remove the bulk of the water. The result is - Hey, this wine is pretty darn good, and you still get to go through the same steps of 'making' the wine yourself."

Black Prince has aspirations to build another 4,000 square foot building on the other side of the crush pad for the custom crush & co-op part of the business, then the current space will become Black Prince exclusively.

"We're growing, and this was our plan from the start, growing along with the business. You look at some wineries here in the County where people have built these massive facilities with capacity for 50,000 cases and they're only bringing in 8 tons of grapes. It remains to be seen whether they're ever going to grow into their own boots. We just didn't have the money to build up to that size. We had to be really frugal with our space. We reclaimed old stables, (an old horse arena), and we turned it into what we needed. But we're at the point where we're going to have to build on to where we're at if we want to expand. We did 5,000 cases last year and I might be able to squeeze another couple thousand cases out of this space. We're about at our limit of what we can do with this facility the way it is," says Webb

And what does the future hold for Black Prince? For now Black Prince is focused on the Cooperative effort, collaborating with small wine growers, giving them an opportunity to realize their dream.

If you'd like to visit Black Prince Winery, they are located at 13370 Loyalist Parkway, Picton, or call 613-476-4888 for more information.

www.blackprincewinery.com.



Clockwise from far left: A mobile bottling line visits the premises for a couple of days to bottle the wine. Geoff Webb, oversees the daily operation at Black Prince Winery. A stack of barrels full of wine await their turn. In the Black Prince production area work is under way for this year's winemaking.

really is. I think this could be a home for more and more small wineries as they emerge. There's no shortage of other wineries that they can approach and talk to as well, but I don't really know how cooperative some of those other wineries are or aren't. I can see some of them saying,

very high-tech piece of equipment that has uses ranging from correcting balance in a finished wine by removing volatile acids, to actually concentrating wine by removing water from it. The latter use has fostered an idea which may just revolutionize the home-winemaking industry. "It isn't

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