

Old World meets New World

Cabernet Franc grapes after 100 days of drying in Rennie Estate Winery's appassimento drying room.

Italian-derived viticulture technique adds complexity to Niagara wines

By Jillian Mitchell

Appassimento. The word glides off the tongue as tenuously as the wine it creates. With an intense nose and a myriad of flavours, such as dark fruits, liquorice, bramble bush, cherry-kirsch, bacon fat, mocha and firm oak notes, appassimento-style wines are big, bold, rich, and layered.

“By drying the grape slowly over 60 to 120 days, Italian wine-makers created a silk purse out of a cow’s ear—a massive, big, beautiful, rich wine called Amarone, which I love,” says Graham Rennie, Beamsville Bench artisanal wine producer. “What really resonated with me was that they employed this appassimento technique to make up for the lack of consistent fruit ripening due to their cool climate in Northern Italy—the same kind of cool climate issues we have in Ontario. So, I thought if I wanted to craft a signature wine, it would be a ‘Super Niagara’ appassimento-style Bordeaux varietal wine.”

After a number of visits to Italy and collaborations with some Veneto-based producers, Rennie decided to make his first full appassimento wine in 2009 from cabernet franc fruit sourced from his Grand Cru site on the Beamsville Bench. He utilized a green house to replicate the drying lofts used in Italy and dried his first batch of grapes (harvested at 22.5 brix and dried to 30 brix before pressing). The result was the successful Rennie Estate’s 2009 Gaia, a rich, complex wine that rocked the world of many wine connoisseurs—though not yet available at a commercial level. Indeed, the next step for Rennie was clear; it was time to make small-lot appassimento-style wine for “big red” aficionados in Canada.

Appassimento is an Old World technique that has been practiced in Italy for more than a century as a natural way to increase concentration of sugar—and flavour—by drying the grapes after harvest for up to 120 days. For Rennie, marrying

Rennie Estate's appassimento drying crates.



Graham Rennie.

the appassimento process and the temperamental Ontario climate was intriguing, but moving to a larger scale meant having better control of the drying process, which is critical for a successful appassimento.

"In this business, there's a lot of experimentation. You're never really sure what's going to happen until 18 months after you've crafted a wine," he says. "When I experimented with appassimento in 2009, I didn't have the variable-controlled drying facilities that they use in Italy. We lost 20 per cent of our fruit to mould, but we still made an amazing wine. So, while I produced our 2010 Gaia from fruit dried in a greenhouse, I decided that for future vintages, I needed to control variables like temperature, air flow, and humidity to create a better appassimento for the commercial level."

A partnership was formed between Rennie Estate Winery, Angel's Gate Winery, and the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre to refine the process for local grape varieties and climatic conditions. It was the perfect match of Old World methodology and New World technology, says Rennie.

After receiving funding from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in 2012, the research team at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre constructed a proprietary drying room facility for the grapes where variables such

as temperature, airflow and humidity could now be better controlled. Dr. Isabelle Lesschaeve, project research lead, was eager to be a part of a venture that offers winemakers such a competitive edge.

“When you have the world at your wine store, it’s difficult to compete. In the Peninsula, more and more wineries are experimenting with the appassimento technique as a possibility for developing a new premium product,” says Dr. Lesschaeve. “They were looking for consistency in the process and productivity. We designed a cost-effective system to achieve that.”

Unique to the drying room is a homogenous airflow system, which evenly circulates air through the stacked plastic-wrapped crates of grapes. This method proactively combats mould and creates much more consistency in the drying process. Another attractive feature is the flexibility of the drying process, with the ability to accelerate or decelerate the drying process accordingly.

As Dr. Lesschaeve explains, the process has tremendous potential for local production of premium vintages and mitigates risk for various pitfalls such as climatic conditions. Naturally, each year the system is tweaked accordingly as the team gets closer to perfecting the process.

“Winemakers are looking for consistency and productivity. I think we’ve found the right system for this,” she says. “On a regular basis, the grape parameters are studied so we have a better understanding of what’s going on. Graham Rennie is really the one driving the effort. He is a great partner to have, a leader in his niche with a lot of foresight for the region.”

With controlled variables, a pinpointed harvest date, and a new formula (a merlot, cabernet franc, and cabernet sauvignon blend), Rennie has crafted what he labels as his “best appassimento wine to date,” Rennie Estate Winery’s 2011 Gaia.

“My aspiration was to craft wine that possesses all of the elements of great wines: balance, but with power; elegance with complexity ... extravagant wines and wines that age. Appassimento allows me to accomplish this in our cool climate region, and we have made an exceptional wine that I am very proud of. No question about it.”

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