



Heike Koch at the frog pond, the vineyard behind, the Niagara Escarpment on the horizon.

By Hand: The Making of Frogpond Farm Wines

By Trudi Down Photos by Mike Davis

"This is my backyard! Why would I want to spray it with chemicals?"

Heike Koch and I are seated at the family picnic table behind the home that she shares with Jens Gemmrich and their three children.

Stretching out before us are 10 acres of grapevines, looking strong and healthy in the mid-July sun. This is Frogpond Farm – an idyllic setting just minutes outside of St. David's, Ontario. It is also Ontario's only organic winery.

Heike and Jens are originally from the Stuttgart area in Germa-

ny, where Jens' family grew grapes and made wines. On learning of farming opportunities in Canada, they emigrated in 1996 and purchased 10 acres at 1385 Larkin Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake. These have been supplemented by 20 additional acres, which they lease. Riesling and Merlot vines were first planted in 1997 and

1998. To these have been added Cabernet Franc, Gammay, Chardonnay, Chambourcin and Vidal.

Organic Grapes

Organic farms don't use foreign substances such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, plant-growth regulators, or livestock feed additives to boost production. Instead,

the farmers rely on crop rotation and animal manure to maintain soil productivity, and hand-tilling to supply nutrients and control weeds. Yields on organic farms are typically lower, but, Heike maintains, of better quality.

When Frogpond's first organic grapes were harvested in 2001, area wineries were not interested. Undaunted, the couple built a barn, bought some tanks and a press, and proceeded to make their own wine - a Riesling and a Cabernet Merlot. A bottle of Frogpond's 2001 Organic Riesling is in the Canadian Wine Library at Brock University.

The enterprise faced some unexpected hurdles: people were unsure about organic wines and didn't like the fact that the product was offered only in small (500 ml) bottles. Gradually, in response to



The vintners' hands: Heike and Jens Gemmrich examine the grapes.



Heike shows a pheromone strip that confuses harmful moths and reduces their reproduction.

the launch of a website and profiles in newspapers and magazines, people started visiting the farm. The natural next step was to build a small shop and obtain a licence to retail on site.

Frogpond wines were certified in 2007 through Pro-Cert Organic Systems (formerly Pro-Cert Canada), Canada's foremost national certifier of organic food products.

Frogpond uses aged manure and refrains from over-fertilizing the soil. Kelp is also applied to help strengthen the vines. To avoid using synthetic fungicides or insecticides, the farm tries to attract a variety of insects by encouraging different kinds of plants and flowers. Weeding is done by hand, using a grape hoe. Yield varies from year to year: the 30 acres produce approximately 60 to 90 tonnes

of grapes, which are made into 35,000 to 50,000 litres of wine.

Harvesting is done by hand because heavy machinery would compact the soil. One advantage of this is that pickers can be selective, avoiding grapes that are not yet ripe or that show signs of fungus. After being crushed and de-stemmed, the grapes go into fermentation tanks where they are left until the juice clears naturally. Red wine is aged in oak casks for about a year. All wines receive only one filtration process prior to bottling. Frogpond does not use preservatives, fining agents or additives in the winemaking process. If the wine needs stabilizing, a natural product such as organic egg white is used.

But, as Heike notes, "If nothing is going wrong, we don't do anything. We simply wait." A tiny bit



Cheers! Cyclists take a break to sample Frogpond's Chambourcin.

Touring wine country by pedal power: bikes parked outside Frogpond's wine shop



The treasure of the Niagara Region: healthy grapes for wine making.

of sulfide is added to the whites, to ensure there is no oxidation.

The farm attempts to create an environment that will attract a variety of insects and birds, so that no one type dominates. In very dry years, when insects take over, Frogpond resorts to spraying the grapes with a soap solution. A little subterfuge also helps – especially when faced with fruit-munching grape berry moth larvae. Plastic strips containing sex pheromones of the females are attached to the vines, to confuse male moths and interfere with their ability to find mates.

Heike notes that a non-organic vintner aims for a certain taste profile; a winery wants to become known for the distinctive taste of its Chardonnay, for example. Organic wines, however, will taste different every year.

Organic icewine poses a particular challenge, Heike admits.

“You have to leave the grapes on the vine until the first frost, but this stresses the vines, something we don't really like to do.” It can also be a challenge to get pickers to come out in the middle of a cold late autumn night, as Heike discovered in 2006. She had to resort to coaxing her daughter and friends, who were having a sleepover, to get dressed and get picking once the temperature reached the desired level!

Currently, Frogpond Farm offers eight wines – five reds and three whites. All, except the icewine, are dry. The 2006 Cabernet Franc is aging well and still available (500 ml). The 2007 Riesling and Cabernet Merlot also come in 500 ml bottles. The 2007 Chardonnay, 2008 Chambourcin, 2008 Cabernet Franc Rosé and 2007 Cabernet Franc are available in 750 ml bottles. Prices range

from \$12 to \$16; the 2007 Riesling Icewine retails at \$32 for a 200-ml bottle.

Explore the Farm

The wines are sold directly from the farm and from the website. Frogpond will ship a case anywhere in Ontario for a flat rate of \$10. Selected products are also available in the Vintages section of a few local LCBOs, and in some area restaurants.

Visitors to the Farm should take time to enjoy a self-guided walking tour to see unusual fowl including guinea hens and skitish tufted black chickens, sheep and of course, a frog pond. Three varieties of frogs, green, leopard, pickerel, have taken up residence, as have eastern painted turtles. The setting attracts an amazing number of dragonflies. The pond is surrounded by lush bulrushes,

which help filter the water and keep it clean.

In the interest of research, this reporter sampled two of Frogpond's wines: the 2008 Chambourcin because it is the top seller in the store this season, and the 2007 Riesling because Riesling is the farm's tried and true offering. The Chambourcin has an elegant bouquet and excellent finish, while the Riesling is very light in colour with a clean, crisp taste.

No award plaques hang on the shop walls. Frogpond Farm doesn't enter wine contests, but its wines continue to generate attention through word of mouth and media coverage.

Trudi Down provides writing, editing, research and proofreading skills for clients in business, arts, advertising and education, through www.thecorporateword.com.