



# WINES IN NIAGARA

A local perspective



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## The impressive transformation of the Lakeview Wine Company in Niagara-on-the-Lake

🕒 April 4, 2018 | 💬 0





By Rick VanSickle

Way back when, the Diamond Estates tasting room was the poor cousin in the Niagara wine family; it was housed in a shack, really, that was not at all that enticing to visiting wine lovers who had far more attractive wineries to explore along the high-rent Niagara Stone Road.





Former tasting/retail facility for Diamond Estates



The new tasting/retail facility for Lakeview Wine Co.

It was a facility not fit for the hefty and diverse VQA portfolio that Diamond Estates has meticulously built for the publicly traded wine company.

In May of last year, everything changed with the opening of the gorgeous and enticing Lakeview Wine Company tasting facility. The 3,000 square foot facility features a 28-foot and a 22-foot marble tasting bar surrounded by full height continuous glass windows providing uninterrupted views of the vineyard and escarpment. The building's exterior is clad in cedar using the unique Japanese technique of 'Shou Sugi Ban' creating a charred cedar look with natural wood accents.

Thier and Curran Architects Inc. designed the wine tasting facility to be both modern and inviting, while incorporating some unique features to enhance the wine tasting experience for visitors.



“This project highlights the natural landscape, and combined with our attention to detail in design, (created) a building among the vines that is decidedly modern, as well as warm and inviting” said Bill Curran, lead architect for the project.

With the opening of the new retail and tasting centre in last May, Diamond Estates ushered in a new future while at the same time honouring a key piece of its history. The official name change occurred on the 25th anniversary of Lakeview Cellars in October 2016, coincident with the ground-breaking ceremony for the new facility.



I reached out recently to Lakeview to get caught up on the wines and to tour the new tasting/retail facility and also the winery, which went through an extensive expansion during the renovations.

I met winemaker Scott McGregor (very top photo) on a brisk Niagara morning and we tasted through key wines in the large portfolio of Lakeview’s collection of brands that include: Lakeview Cellars (top-tier wines), Dan Aykroyd (good-sized brand that’s holding steady), FRESH (“fun, affordable VQA brand with solid listings at the LCBO), EastDell (another top-tier brand that includes the popular Black Cab), Twenty Bees (which has found new life in the grocery stream), the McMichael Collection (the gallery gets a portion of proceeds) as well as the top-selling kosher wines under the label Tzafona Cellars.





Lakeview is the third largest wine company in Ontario in terms of VQA sales. As McGregor explains, the company is completely focused on VQA wines even though, like the two companies with the largest VQA sales (Peller and Arterra), it does have one of the coveted licences that allows them to make ICB (International Canadian Blend) wine if it so chooses.

McGregor says that is a rarity at Lakeview and currently no blended wines are for sale. The licence is only used during severe short crops and even then mostly to beef up export products when Ontario grapes are scarce.

“The Ontario market is where we try to focus,” he says.



The tasting and retail facility isn't the only thing at Lakeview that has gone through a massive transformation. And that becomes quite evident as McGregor takes me on a tour of the adjacent 43,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art wine-making facility, a building that he calls "the best kept secret in Niagara-on-the-Lake. People are always surprised."

From our perch on the catwalk, high above the winery floor, there is a sea of oak wine barrels, somewhere in the neighbourhood of 1,000 oak barriques that hold the company's production of wines for barrel aging.

Further down the catwalk, which cannot be accessed by the public (but there are public tours available at floor level to see the entire winemaking process), 28 massive, 84,000-litre two-storey wine tanks can be seen on the winery floor as well as 48,000-litre tanks, 24,000-litre tanks and even tiny 1,000-litre tanks.

"We have the ability to deal with small batches of wine as well as large volumes," McGregor says.

Production levels for Lakeview's various wines range from 200 cases to the 10,000-case EastDell Black Cab, one of the company's most popular wines made from Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Baco Noir.

"It's the wine people love to tell their friends about," McGregor says. It was first made in 2001 and was tweaked when McGregor came on board with Diamond Estates in 2003. Today, it's made in several sizes: 200 mL, 750 mL, 1.5 L and 3 L.

It is one of the largest production wines in the vast stable that is Lakeview's diverse portfolio, but with 250,000 cases of wine made in 2017, all VQA, it's still only a small slice of the large pie that is made at the facility.

The other major aspect to the winery is the bottling wine, which goes year-round until the grapes begin arriving in the fall (all hands are needed during harvest). In all, about 50 employees work at the winery.

Here are some wines currently available that I tasted and liked with McGregor.

**Lakeview Cellars Viognier 2016 (\$19, 88 points)** — This is relatively new to the portfolio with the first vintage of Viognier made in 2014. It has a fresh and aromatic nose of apricot, peach and grapefruit with some spicy notes. It is ripe with full-on fruit on the palate and displays juicy apricot, tropical fruits and peach with a finessed finish.

**Lakeview Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2016 (\$19, 88 points)** — A balanced approach to SB here with a nose of grapefruit, citrus, gooseberry and tropical fruits with hints of grass and herbs. There is a savoury note on the palate to go with tropical fruits, herbs and fresh-cut citrus with tingling acidity on the finish.

**Lakeview Cellars Syrah 2013 (\$25, 91 points)** — The superstar of this tasting with a bright and expressive nose of cherry, pepper, cassis and a range of spice and earth notes. It shows lovely ripe red and dark fruits on the palate with spice, peppercorns, smoke and earthy/savouriness on the finish. A really nice cool-climate Syrah.

**Lakeview Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 (\$30, 89 points)** — A core of ripe fruit including black currants, black berries, vanilla, oak spice and underlying cherry/raspberry notes. The red and dark fruits on the palate are joined by lovely barrel oak spices, assertive tannins and high-toned acidity to keep it all fresh and lively through the finish.

**EastDell Black Cab 2015 (\$15, LCBO, 88 points)** — This beloved Niagara staple (10,000 cases are made and sold in Ontario) is a blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Baco Noir that changes, depending on the vintage, to keep a familiar profile year to year. It is a backyard special that can appeal to a lot of friends and family. It has a smoky nose of cherry, bramble, vanilla toast, black pepper, raspberry, cassis and spice. It is ripe and plush on the palate with soft tannins and lively acidity to go with ripe fruits, savoury spices and plenty of peppery/smoky notes through the finish. A crowd-pleaser.

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Wines In Niagara is a website that focuses primarily on the wonderful wines and food made in the Niagara Peninsula. The mission is to be as complete, current, interactive and informative as we possibly can be.