Canada’s Sesquicentennial

NIAGARA SUCCESS STORY

GRAPE GROWERS OF ONTARIO

Celebrating 70 years of growing into the future.

BY SCOTT LESLIE

In many ways, the Grape Growers of Ontario is like any fine wine—it’s getting better with age.

If you’re not familiar with the Grape Growers of Ontario, this time-honoured organization has been around for seven decades and represents over 500 grape growers throughout Ontario. That includes over 178 wineries in such picturesque places as the Niagara Peninsula, Prince Edward County and the Lake Erie North Shore.

The Grape Growers of Ontario was formed under the Farm Products Marketing Act back in 1947—a united legislated group of growers-by-growers-for-growers. Originally known as the Ontario Grape Growers Marketing Board, this self-governing farming organization was designed to ensure a fair minimum price for processing grapes—regardless of which processor was the buyer.

And from 1947 right up to the present day, the Grape Growers of Ontario has been dedicated to working with its industry partners and the government to grow the market for Ontario grown grape products and meet the challenges of an ever-changing marketplace.

A HISTORIC BEGINNING

The Ontario Grape Growers Marketing Board began modestly enough. In late 1947, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board held its inaugural meeting at the Agricultural Hall on James Street in St. Catharines before moving into a more official office on 3 King Street.

Back in its early years, the board had a small staff which included Bookkeeper W.A. Brown, Office Administrator Peggy Leake and Secretary Keith Matthie. However, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board was able to get a great deal accomplished, working with various wineries and grape juice processors to obtain contracts for its growers. In 1948, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Co-operative opened one of the country’s largest and most modern juice processing plants in St. Catharines—supplying Welch’s grape juice.

The Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board didn’t solely focus on marketing and the production of grapes; however. It was an active participant in the grape growing community.

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How Times Have Changed

1954

Grapes purchased: 42,421 METRIC TONNES
Value of crops: $1.9 MILLION
Grape varietals ALMOST ALL LABRUSCA (JUICE)
Ontario wine sold in Ontario 8.1 MILLION LITRES

1969

Grapes purchased: 50,226 METRIC TONNES
Value of crops: $7.4 MILLION
Grape varietals 86% LABRUSCA
Ontario wine sold in Ontario 35 MILLION LITRES

1984

Grapes purchased: 74,400 METRIC TONNES
Value of crops: $30.6 MILLION
Grape varietals 65% LABRUSCA
35% HYBRID AND VINIFERA
Ontario wine sold in Ontario 45 MILLION LITRES

2016

Grapes purchased: 70,851 METRIC TONNES
Value of crops: $95.3 MILLION
Grape varietals 3% LABRUSCA
97% HYBRID AND VINIFERA
Ontario wine sold in Ontario 79.6 MILLION LITRES
In 1952, Bevis Walters proposed to the board the idea of having a world-class festival that would celebrate the growers of the Niagara Region. With the support of the board, the City of St. Catharines and the Canadian Wine Institute, the Niagara Grape & Wine Festival would be born that same year.

Over the years, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board would continue to grow in size and scope. Between 1965 and 1969, its growers were adding 300,000 new grape vines each and every year and making the transition towards French hybrid and vinifera grape varieties. The board would also begin building relationships with the federal and provincial governments to help grow the Ontario wine industry. In November of 1975 for instance, it worked with the LCBO to open its first wine store in downtown Toronto to sell wines made exclusively in Ontario. The new LCBO outlet had a vast inventory of over 500 wines from all of Ontario’s commercial wineries. The idea was so successful that the LCBO would open its 100th Ontario wine store by 1976.

That same spirit of cooperation would continue for years to come. In 1990, the board’s efforts resulted in the Ontario government’s approval of Sunday openings for wineries—not to mention the use of credit cards onsite. These initiatives would increase the popularity of Ontario wineries significantly, help the industry thrive, and turn Ontario’s wine country into a world-class tourist destination.

The board would also continue to expand its operation through the years—launching a new corporate office on 1634 South Service Road in St. Catharines in 1979.

**A CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

Over time, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board would often be the catalyst for monumental changes. In order to help growers improve the quality and scope of their vineyards, the board often encouraged growers to embrace new farming practices. In 1977 for instance, it formed a new Ontario Grape and Wine Standards Committee to test each variety of grape before harvesting and set common standards for various factors such as sugar level.

In the 1940s, Ontario farmers typically grew labrusca grapes which were perfect for uses like juice, preserves and dessert wines. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a shift took place in the industry. Ontario farmers began removing over 8,000 acres of labrusca grapes like Concord and Niagara as well as some hybrid grapes from their vineyards, replacing them with more traditional European vinifera varieties like Chardonnay and Riesling which were more suitable for the production of table wines.
The Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) at Brock University

The Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) at Brock University would like to congratulate the Grape Growers of Ontario (GGO) on 70 years of success.

The GGO played a pivotal role in CCOVI’s establishment in 1996, and since that time, the organization has expanded its contributions to CCOVI to include funding research and outreach initiatives, providing important scholarship support, hiring promising students and alumni, and hosting industry-specific field trips.

Our organizations work together to grow the grape and wine industry, bringing innovative tools and technologies to the forefront to improve quality, competitiveness and awareness of this vital industry in Ontario.

Working with partners like the GGO has allowed CCOVI to establish itself as an internationally recognized research institute on cool climate viticulture, oenology, wine business and wine culture.

Recently, CCOVI has moved its innovative research beyond the science disciplines of oenology and viticulture, expanding activities to look at all areas of the grape and wine value chain, such as wine business, policy research and agri-tourism.

As our institute continues to expand, we look forward to many more years of partnership and support from our friends at the GGO.

Connect with CCOVI and learn more at brocku.ca/ccovi
In the years to follow, the board would increasingly hone its focus on innovation through new research and technologies and the continuous improvement of its services. In 2008, for instance, it developed a new web-based vine management tool for growers called Vitis. This application uses geographical information and global positioning to help growers maintain accurate information on their vineyards. Following Vitis’ successful launch, the organization received the Premier’s Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence. In 2015, the organization also won the Premier’s Regional Award for its Viticulture Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool which gives growers the opportunity to achieve sustainability certification. (Both applications are now part of a larger system called eGrape which acts as a data management, communication, and vineyard management tool for the industry.)
New views.
New tastes.
No apologies.
In the new millennium, the Ontario Grape Growers’ Marketing Board would also reach a significant milestone in its development. In 2002, it officially changed its name to "Grape Growers of Ontario." With the name change, and a new vision and mission statement, the organization demonstrated its commitment to tackling the issues of the future—doing everything from price negotiations to participating in government consultations to connecting with consumers and making sure its members’ voices are heard.

GROWING FURTHER, TOGETHER

On a day-to-day basis, the Grape Growers of Ontario is constantly looking for ways to expand the market for its members’ grapes and Ontario wines on a domestic and international scale. The organization takes care of various other responsibilities like grape research and inspection, pricing and marketing, government lobbying, and farm labour legislation. The Grape Growers of Ontario even monitors pesticide issues, keeping in close contact with the Canadian Pest Management Regulatory Agency to ensure that the appropriate crop protection is available.

In addition to a permanent staff, the Grape Growers of Ontario has an elected board of directors that meets frequently to approve the organization’s policies and direction. The Grape Growers of Ontario also has several committees that work on specific issues and compile strategic studies that can help enhance and promote the interests of its members.

But the Grape Growers of Ontario doesn’t just represent Ontario grape growers. It also works closely with the communities in which they operate. For instance, the organization continues to support and sponsor the Niagara Grape & Wine Festival as well as other provincial events like Terroir in Prince Edward County and Vintages in Lake Erie North Shore. The Grape Growers of Ontario is firmly...
committed to education, acting as a proud sponsor of Niagara College’s Wine Visitor and Education Centre and a participant with the Cool Climate Genology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University.

Over the years, the organization has developed strategic partnerships with several organizations like the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, the Wine Council of Ontario, the Winery and Grower Alliance of Ontario, and the LCBO, not to mention all levels of government.

In 2010, the Grape Growers of Ontario would even launch a new marketing campaign—“We Grow the Wines You Love”—that celebrates where grapes come from, the growers themselves, and their successful growing philosophies and techniques. (To see a full presentation go to www.localgrapes.ca.)

AN ENDURING LEGACY

Ontario is now the country’s leading producer of grapes and responsible for about 70% of all grape production in Canada. The Niagara Region in particular accounts for more than 93% of Ontario’s total grape growing volume. The industry has also evolved into an acclaimed grape and wine destination with many new innovative products like Icewines that have become popular worldwide.

But one thing hasn’t changed. The Grape Growers of Ontario continues to represent its members, act as the voice of the industry, and advocate for issues to strengthen Ontario’s grape and wine industry. Having championed Ontario’s grape growers and their products for 70 years, the Grape Growers of Ontario has clearly become a force to be reckoned with. There’ve been dramatic changes in the industry and many hardships along the way. But the Grape Growers of Ontario continues to meet each challenge head on.

Its strong commitment to Ontario grape growers—and the communities where they live and farm—is a legacy that continues to grow into the future.

> A tradition of distinction. Grape Growers of Ontario celebrate viticulture excellence by recognizing a top grower each year since 1956 as “Grape King.” (Photo by Denis Cahill)

> FAST FACTS: THE ONTARIO GRAPE AND WINE INDUSTRY

- Ontario grape growers have invested over $684-million in their land and vineyards through the years.
- The wine industry generates $825-million in retail sales in Ontario.
- For every tonne of grapes sold, the industry contributes $62,000 to the economy.
- The Ontario grape and wine industry generates more than 18,000 jobs.
- The total economic impact of the Ontario wine industry is $5.4-billion.
- In terms of tourism, more than 2.4 million people visit Ontario wineries every year.

> GRAPE GROWERS OF ONTARIO CHAIRS

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<td>H.E. Kilman</td>
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<td>Matthias Oppenlaender</td>
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