



The sleek winery building at Stratus in Niagara-on-the-Lake, by local architect Les Andrew, has been recognized as breaking ground in environmental design.

Eco-wonder of the wine world

The new Niagara winery Stratus draws not only oenophiles, but ecologically astute design buffs as well, writes **LEAH MCLAREN**

The grape harvest is late this year. But even before the fruit had ripened on the vine, a new Niagara Region vineyard was busy reaping the benefits.

Since opening last May, the new winery at Stratus has become a public attraction for architecture buffs as well as oenophiles.

The stark, contemporary lines of the building by Niagara architect Les Andrew stand out from the countryside. Rustic hand-harvested fields lie in the shadow of modern design.

The view perfectly illustrates Stratus' marriage of Old World winemaking and forward-thinking ecological design.

In the airy lobby by designer Diego Burdi, whose recent projects include the remaking of Holt Renfrew's flagship in Toronto, members of the public can stop in for a \$10 tasting at the bar under four-storey ceilings.

There are as many architecture and design books for sale as there are wine texts and cookbooks. Charles Baker, director of marketing and sales, says they get as many tour requests from architecture enthusiasts as they do from wine lovers.

Established in 2000, Stratus is one of the first winemakers in Canada to devote itself to sustainable production from the ground up.

Upon opening in the spring, it became the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) building in Canada and the only certified winery in the world. In order to meet the stringent criteria set by the Canada Green Building Council (who hand out the certification in these parts), the winery had to get inventive.

The list of the company's environmental features is impressive. The building temperature is maintained by geothermal technology, a complex alternative to furnaces and air conditioners that uses the heat from the earth for warmth in the winter and cools in the summer by sending the building's heat into the ground.

The stones in the parking lot outside were carefully selected to reduce light-reflected warmth. The building itself was constructed primarily from recycled materials and did not expand the winery's original environmental "footprint" (for every tree cut down another was

subsequently planted).

All the plumbing and electrical systems are energy-efficient. All vegetal waste is composted. The landscaping around the building consists entirely of indigenous plants and grasses.

Employees even have private bike locks and lockers in which to store their helmets and the company car is, of course, a hybrid gas electronic Toyota Prius.

Inside the winery, fruit flies hang lazily in the air as the oak casks are pumped with water in preparation for juice.

What looks to be just an average industrial wine-making conveyor system is in fact one of the more innovative aspects of the winery. Instead of being transported on moving belts, gravity alone brings the grapes through the production process from the top floor to the bottom.

The result, says winemaker Jean-Laurent Groux, makes Stratus the only winery in the world that he knows of that doesn't use a pump to move the product.

"It's modern," says the Loire-Valley-born vintner with a mad-scientist beard, "but it's also a very traditional system. One hundred years ago, they didn't have pumps, either."

Which brings us to the other traditional aspect of Stratus: namely the wine. Here, too, the vineyard uses an old-fashioned (and somewhat unfashionable) method to achieve a contemporary result.

Its method, known as "assemblage," consists of sorting only the best red and white grapes – regardless of variety – to produce the best blended wine of the season.

By not focusing on specific grape varieties (pinot noir, chardonnay and so forth), Mr. Groux is able to taste indiscriminately until he finds the perfect balance in taste and nose.

Out in the fields, he greets one of the migrant workers and leans down to pluck a bunch of gamay.

"Try it," he says, handing me a grape and popping another in his mouth. The skin is so soft it practically dissolves in my mouth.

"If you want to make great wine, you make it here," Mr. Groux says, sweeping his hand over a row of vines. "It's been a great year. Not so much in quantity, but in

quality."

It is, of course, the same equation that is the driving force behind this young winery. Out here in Jackson-Triggs country (which happens to be next door), most vineyards are taking in 200 tonnes of machine harvested fruit a day this time of year. Compare that with Stratus' handpicked average daily crop of three tonnes.

"We are small, but we have great diversity," Mr. Groux says, referring to the many grape varieties growing in 35 separate blocks on this tiny farm.

"Everything we do, from picking to sorting to bottling, is in an effort to be very gentle with the grapes."

The simple, qualitatively stringent and somewhat unorthodox approach to winemaking is part of the reason Stratus has chosen to remain a consignment-only business.

The company also has a secondary label, Wild Ass, which is available in many Toronto restaurants, and both marques haven been receiving rave reviews around the world.

Cheers to that.

Tasting notes

Stratus' building is an eco-wonder, and its winemaking process is tantalizingly old-school – but how's the juice itself?

■ Stratus White 2002 (\$36): An aromatic gem, billowing sexy scents of lychee, pineapple and smoke. On the palate, it is full-bodied, fleshy and round.

■ Stratus White 2000 (\$40): Shows mango, honey and smoke on the nose – echoed on the creamy, beautifully structured and still very fresh palate. The finish is amazingly long, with a kick of lemony acidity.

■ Stratus Red 2002 (\$38): Contains significant amounts of gamay and cabernet franc. Bright and fruity, offering up blackcurrent and cherry and a crisp finish.

■ Stratus Merlot (\$55): Decanted two days earlier to subdue its formidable tannins, it still tasted remarkably fresh, with hints of blackberry and cedar on a chewy concentrated bases.

– Beppi Crosarolo