

New vineyard in Niagara lured senior winemaker J.L. Groux from Hillebrand Estates

Stratus uses gravity-flow technology so wine is handled as little as possible, *Gordon Stimmell writes*

Winemaking mission

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE—There's a new kid on the Ontario wine block, a winery dedicated to making super-premium wines of the first order. Its name is Stratus.

What's in a name? Lots. When owner David Feldberg conceived of the concept of making a winery, he reportedly mused aloud about creating "something small, maybe like Opus."

Opus, of course, is the jewel of the Napa Valley, a Mondavi-Rothschild collaboration gem of a winery that makes hedonistic cult reds from a building that looks like a spaceship set inside a Greek temple.

So in the quest for a name, they brainstormed with consultant Peter Gamble who had made his mark by putting the Vintner's Quality Alliance on the map. Names like Opus, Dominus, Petrus, and Trius danced and echoed in their heads.

Trius, because the winemaker was J.L. Groux, 48, who created the line of wines bearing that name at nearby Hillebrand during his 15 year stint with them. Luring Groux into the new winery was the first really big move.

Stratus was finally settled upon as the name of the state-of-the-art winery. Like lofty upper atmosphere stratus clouds. A rarified atmosphere concept, that ties into the winery's many windows and natural light. And Stratus can also signify stratigraphy, the complex layers of soil so important to growing great grapes.

The land, a parcel of 62 acres, was purchased in September 2000 from grape grower George Werner along Highway 55 leading into Niagara-on-the-Lake. The vineyard work began immediately, tearing off low-yield grapes in preparation for the first harvest, which was already upon them.

Feldberg, who trained as a lawyer and is CEO for office furniture manufacturer Teknion, is a design oriented guy. But the concept for the winery was to be strictly gravity flow, which means the grapes being processed into wine move in stages from high to low points by gravity in the winery. This avoids too much handling and pumping,



Winemaker J.L. Groux has total control of the grapes at the new, ultra-modern Stratus Vineyards, where he plans to coax world-class flavours from different blends of classic grape varieties.

which can destroy the quality of the final wine.

Problem was, most gravity flow wineries are set into hillsides. The grapes get loaded in back on the upper hill level, then mother nature helps with gravity. Stratus is located on land as flat as a proverbial pancake. That's where the elevators came in, to move tanks up and down. The winery was designed as winemaker's dream.

Groux's favourite saying these days as he shows visitors around, is: "The grapes take the elevator, we walk." With his frizzy, out of control hair and wild gaze, Groux reminds one of a mad winemaker genius, with visual echoes of Einstein.

I won't bore you with tank talk, but while the outside of the building is reminiscent of a big glass shoebox, the inside has every conceivable piece of ultra-modern equipment, from movable double sorting tables to massive elevated oak Grenier wood fermenters.

Groux is as excited as a kid with a big allowance in a candy store. As winemaker at Stratus, he has total control of the grapes and vineyards. His mission in life is to coax world-class flavours from a myriad of grapes, including classic Bordeaux varieties (cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, petit verdot), Burgundy varieties (Chardonnay) and Rhone grapes (syrah, viognier) – not to mention gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc, semillon and malbec.

The art of blending grapes, which Groux mastered at Hillebrand, is in full play in the Stratus wines. The flag-

ships are **Stratus 2002 Red** (\$38, rating 90/100) a blend drawn from cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot, gamay, syrah, malbec and merlot with blackberry, vanilla, and mellow chocolate accented tones.

Stratus 2002 White (\$36, 88) selected from varieties such as chardonnay, gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc and semillon displays clean white peach, lime and melon character. It lacks the ripe complexity of the famed multi-grape white Conundrum from California.

Several single varietal stunners have been sculpted so far, including an amazing **2002 Chardonnay Reserve** (\$55, 93) drawn from only four barrels, with refined crushed pineapple, guava, and coconut spice elegance. Also delicious are **2002 Merlot** (\$55, 90) with big licorice, black cherry and cedar structure, and **2001 Gamay Noir** (\$26, 90), one of the best gamays I have tasted from Ontario, with exotic spice, smoke and earthy flavours finishing with a slight gamey tang.

But what about the barrels of wine that do not quite make it to the stratosphere? They go into a lower-priced blend called Wildass, which is meant to be a fun, bistro-style wine for sale to restaurants. **Wildass 2002 White** (17, 89) is quite classy, with buttery spicy apple from reserve oak treatment, and **Wildass 2002 Red** (\$19, 87) is a fairly wobbly effort, with candied black cherry and cedar stylings.

Groux and Gamble liken Wildass to Lee and Stratus to Susur, in reference to Toronto's top chef Susur Lee, who

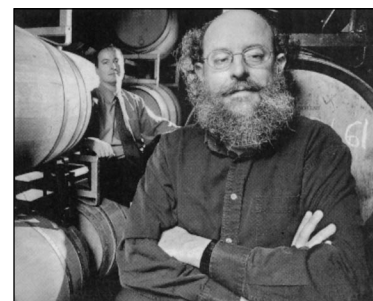
has opened a price friendly Lee restaurant next door to his culinary opus, Susur.

Quantities are small and availability limited to the winery. The Wildass duo will be available via wildasswines.com and in restaurants. The upper-tier Stratus wines are coming in tiny amounts to Vintages later this fall and in June via their website, stratuswines.com.

The official winery opening is set for late June, but if you venture down to Niagara, the winery is open to visitors Wednesday to Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. A special three-glass tasting in stemware especially suited to the varietals is available for \$10 at the winery tasting bar.

And if sipping Stratus stimulates your hunger, there's noted regional chef Tony de Luca's wonderful deli operation with its sinful sandwiches next door, which is just a footpath away.

Email: gstimmell@thestar.ca



SHERYL NADLER FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Stratus Vineyards winemaker J.L. Groux, front, and marketing and sales director Charles Baker.