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Passionate about grapes

Closson Chase owner is ready to take on the LCBO

Presented by



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Courtesy of Closson Chase Winery

From a base of limestone perched on the edge of Lake Ontario, Seaton McLean has carved out a 12-hectare rural idyll, where the only movement on a late spring afternoon is the dust on the breeze and a hummingbird on the vines.

Closson Chase is the perfect setting for a fairytale ending to the life story of a man who spent a quarter century building one of the most successful Canadian film and television studios in history, before bowing out with his health and wealth intact.

Yet, as the seasons have turned, a restlessness has returned to the spirit of the wild-haired entrepreneur. Although hard for a visitor to detect at first, trouble has blown into wine country.

While the winery Mr. McLean co-owns is blossoming after 10 years of graft, neighbours who have followed the path beaten by the ground-breaking venture have not all fared as well.

The big businessman turned small businessman has had to look on as hardships are visited on farm families who shifted land to grapes as a means to hold on to their homesteads in Prince Edward County.

With each harvest, Mr. Mclean watches plentiful crops left to wither on the vine.

During the last harvest, 4,000 tonnes of the province's grapes were let perish, according to Grape Growers of Ontario figures. This season could be five times worse.

Were it down to a natural blight or cruel turn of the weather, the winemaker might have made his peace with the course of events and maintained his seclusion. Instead, he has agreed to this interview because of a seemingly-strong conviction the root cause of the scourge is a cynical and senseless ploy.

Mr. McLean argues-- first gently, and then pointedly -- that an opportunity to revive Ontario's greenbelt and foster sustainable farming is "being killed off by a clever con."

Ontario grapes are going sour, he says, because cheap imported wine is being passed off as local product by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO).

Thanks in part to a little-known law cemented during negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement, most Ontario wines on offer in the province's government-controlled wine stores are not what they seem. Carefully worded regulations allow for wine marketed in LCBO stores as Canadian product to have 70% foreign content, 20% water, and only 10% Ontario juice. The clue is a discrete reference in the fine print: "Cellared in Canada."

It is a state of affairs Dalton McGuinty, the provincial premier, is increasingly being dragged into addressing, in part because of behind-the-scenes efforts by Mr. McLean.

The premier's initial response was to have officials order the big wine importers and grape growers into a dialogue. But those talks have broken down, according to people privy to the negotiations.

"It is like pairing off the hen and the wolf and saying: 'go into the coup and sort things out,' " Mr. McLean says.

Now, growers are appealing directly to Mr. McGuinty to intervene, before they blow the whistle on industry practices loud enough to tarnish the name of Ontario wine.

Negotiators acting on behalf of growers are pressing the premier to direct the liquor board to ensure at least half the shelf space set aside for local vintages is filled by wines made from 100% Ontario grapes.

This, growers argue, would provide some immediate assurance to farmers who are encouraged by spring conditions that point to a bumper crop, but fear a repeat of last year, when they were unable to sell their grapes as imports of cheap wine used for blending soared.

While an even share of shelf space might provide some short-term protection for Ontario's greenbelt, Mr. McLean says deeper changes are required to ensure the long-term viability of the sector's small operators, starting with labelling.

A spokesperson for the Wine Council, which is dominated by big importers, said informed consumers can already identify 100% Ontario wine.

"They have VQA," said the spokesperson, referring to a moniker the LCBO uses to distinguish wine cellared in Canada from wine made in Canada out of grapes grown here.

Mr. McLean is unconvinced. "The bottles look exactly the same," he says. "When a consumer walks into the LCBO and sees 'cellared in Canada', there is no way for them to know that this wine is not made from grapes grown here. It is simply a brilliant phrase to mask what is going on," he adds.

Mr. McLean also fears Canada is letting the opportunity to build a credible international brand slip through its fingers. Industry practices risk turning Canadian wines into a "laughing stock", he says.

"In France, if you put water into wine you go to jail," he points out.

As he winds up what has turned into a lecture on the ills of the industry, Mr. McLean concedes he has brought into his new life many of the traits that made him so successful as the money man behind television hits like CSI. "Type A personalities like me say: 'Geez, something is very wrong here. I better wade in.' "

This inner drive now appears to be rewriting his story. Uncontent with helping to re-craft 12 hectares of rough farm land into a small, world-renowned vineyard, Mr. Mc-Lean instead seems determined to reshape the landscape of another Canadian industry.

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