



some of his herbs and edible flowers. These requests led to the birth of the retail operation. “It seemed to make sense to me – fine foods and flowers are natural partners,” George Boncheff Jr. points out.

The shop showcases what is the culmination of fifteen years of hard work combined with a passion for quality. Every product is personally sourced by George, and requires his seal of approval before it’s allowed on the shelves. At one end of the store is a large display of Rootham products, including jams, sweet and savoury condiments, and dipping sauces. The Guelph-based company even makes Crantini garnishes using Bala cranberries – a colourful addition to splash into your martini glass.

The store expands into a series of small rooms, each filled with shelf after shelf of fine food products – some local, some from around the world. George has a robust affection for hot sauces, evidenced in the countless number of varieties on the shelves. George’s personal favourite is Smoked – a Dan-T’s Inferno chipotle sauce made by Mississauga entrepreneurs Dan and Therese Taylor. Another sauce with kick is Everything Maple’s Yikes BBQ sauce. The Orillia-based company owned by Tracy Moore, a former caterer and chocolatier, mixes pure maple syrup with habanero-spiked tomato sauce, an addictively tangy combination that’s great on chicken and wonderful on grilled salmon.

The Boncheffs are justifiably proud of the wide variety of high quality food items they carry. Thankfully you don’t have to be a top chef to get some of Stella’s flower petals: they’re available in small packages for a very reasonable \$1.50, right next to the fresh herbs, greens and vegetables.

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– LeeAnne Wright

BONCHEFF GREENHOUSES THE FINE FOOD BOUTIQUE

A commercial area filled with automobile body shops is an unlikely place to find a shop such as The Fine Food Boutique. Yet despite the store’s gritty location and unassuming looks, a steady stream of chefs from across the city saunters past matriarch Stella Boncheff, who can often be found sitting near the door gently pulling flower petals from their stems. The flowers – pansies –are grown in the greenhouse behind the store.

There is a long history of food in this area. George Boncheff established the greenhouse and farm back in 1945, a time when the area south of Bloor and just west of Islington had many agricultural businesses. The auto shops moved in as farm plots were sold off. Low-slung, small-scale industrial buildings popped up on land where vegetables once grew.

Boncheff Greenhouses never left, but it has evolved. The Fine Food Boutique is an offshoot of a successful wholesale business grown by son Tom that sells fresh herbs, baby vegetables and salad greens. Local herbs come from the Friendly Neighbours Herb Farm in Markham and greens from Slegers Premium Organics in Strathroy. Retail customers coming in to buy flowers would often ask Tom if they could purchase



A EUROPEAN TRADITION IN THE ESSENCE OF NIAGARA

It was late summer 2006. George Coomber and his wife, Christiane, were staying at a bed-and-breakfast in Gore's Landing, a small community on Rice Lake just south of Peterborough. As their host was serving the salad at dinner, the Coomers immediately recognized the distinct aroma of Chardonnay Peach Vinegar. "It has quite a bouquet," says George. "You can smell it and, therefore, taste it on your palate almost before you put it in your mouth." The peach-infused vinaigrette wasn't the surprise: it was finding it at this relatively obscure dining spot – a testament to the couple's intense efforts to spread the word about Essence of Niagara premium wine vinegars.

As co-directors of marketing and communications for Niagara Vinegars, the Niagara-on-the-Lake producers of Essence of Niagara, the Coomers are part of a close-knit team that is running with the vision of founder and former president Russ Mannen. The vision? To follow the European tradition of creating top-quality flavour-infused and varietal wine vinegars in established wine-growing regions. The company's Pinot Noir Wine Vinegar, for example, starts with some of Niagara's finest Pinot Noir wine. To perfect his products, Mannen spent almost five years researching and buying European equipment, and testing various fermentation techniques. Although still an investor, Mannen no longer runs the day-to-day operations.

Mannen's vision of product excellence still remains the driving force behind the company. "It doesn't take long to learn that bad wine makes bad vinegar," says Coomber, explaining that the vinegars are made using only VQA-certified wines from about fifteen Niagara wineries.

Essence of Niagara products have attracted the attention of numerous chefs, including Owen Steinberg, executive chef for Il Fornello in Toronto. Part of his role as top chef has been to create a menu based on local foods for Il Fornello's nine locations. "You don't have time to produce everything on your own," says Steinberg, an enthusiastic supporter of local farmers and producers. "So you look for products

with quality and integrity, and that match your business model." He judges these specialty vinegars by the results he

achieves when cooking with them. "You can tell when you do a reduction, you get either a nice, natural sweetness, or you get a bitterness," he explains. "With these, you get sweetness without adding any sugar."

Steinberg attributes this level of quality to someone with an excellent palate overseeing the company's fermentations and infusions. The kudos belong to Bev Mataseje, who runs Niagara Vinegars' quality control and test kitchen. Raised on a local farm, Mataseje inherited recipes passed down from generation to generation. "She knows what spice works with what, how things interact, and how certain fruits or vegetables marinate," says Coomber.

Coomber likes to get Essence of Niagara products into the hands of local chefs. "Chefs are positive gossips," he says. "When they think something is really great, they tell other chefs." And, on the other hand, chefs are also good for quality control. "They'll tell you straight out if something isn't working," Coomber says, adding that if a chef can't work with a product, a home cook certainly isn't going to be able to cook with it.

Unlike the art of winemaking – where growers till the soil, plant the vines, pick the grapes and squeeze the juices – producing vinegar doesn't have the same bucolic images. But it requires a similar attention to detail and a delicate touch when it comes to processing. At the company's plant, wine from local producers flows into two large-scale fermenters – one for red and the other for white. The vinegar-maker adds a bacterial culture that originated in the same region of France from which many of the grape growers in this area got their vines, making the culture highly compat-

ible with the local grapes. During fermentation, the wine goes from an alcohol content of 11 percent to 14 percent, with a similar percentage of acid. The vinegars age and cure as concentrates, and are then diluted three-to-one with water to produce a more palatable, less-acidic taste. To emphasize the artisanal nature of the Essence of Niagara products, elegantly curved bottles imported from Italy are filled with the varietal vinegars, then corked and sealed by hand.

It is the Coomers' role to ensure that all forty of the finely crafted products the company produces end up on the plates of people who will appreciate their ability to complement and enhance foods, whether it's pork grilled with Vidal Juicy Orange, fruit drizzled with a Baco Noir Balsamic reduction or a salad dressing made with Empire Apple Cider Vinegar.

A retired spiritual director who specialized in crisis management, George Coomber approaches his task from a unique perspective: "I see the local foods movement as highly spiritual because it's linked to who we are and how we treat the Earth," he explains, "and that is connected to my Algonquin heritage." His wife, Christiane, shares his special connection with food and his passion for fine cuisine. "She's Parisian, and in French culture, food is highly spiritual," he says. "There – especially in Paris – shopping for, preparing, and consuming food are all spiritual acts."

Niagara Vinegars launched what Coomber considers its premier product line – IceVine Vinegar and IceVine Jelly – at the Gourmet Food & Wine Expo in Toronto in November. Made from ice wine harvested in 2005 and 2006, the vinegars and jellies are a rich amber colour. The limited edition release of 10,000 litres a year is what Coomber calls a small amount when you think globally. And with a product like this, global is the next big step. In 2008, the Coomers will take their message to the U.S. and Japan. As with ice wine itself, Japan has an insatiable appetite for high-end spin-offs, and about 80 percent of the company's IceVine line will be headed to the discriminating Japanese market.

But in every region Niagara Vinegars products are sold, and with every culture that uses them, Coomber says the most popular product reaches back to the company's local Ontario roots: Maple Vidal Wine Vinegar – produced from Niagara maple syrup – is always its most popular item.

– Margaret Nearing

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