

GORD ON GRAPES

# LCBO just a drop in the bucket in the world of wine

**To taste vintages that aren't on the shelf, turn to enterprises that bring wine to your door**

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**Gord Stimmell**  
WINE CRITIC

If you think the LCBO has captured all the world's wines, think again. Even with 600 stores, shelf space is, by necessity, limited. We get only a taste, the merest morsel, of the thousands of wines out there.

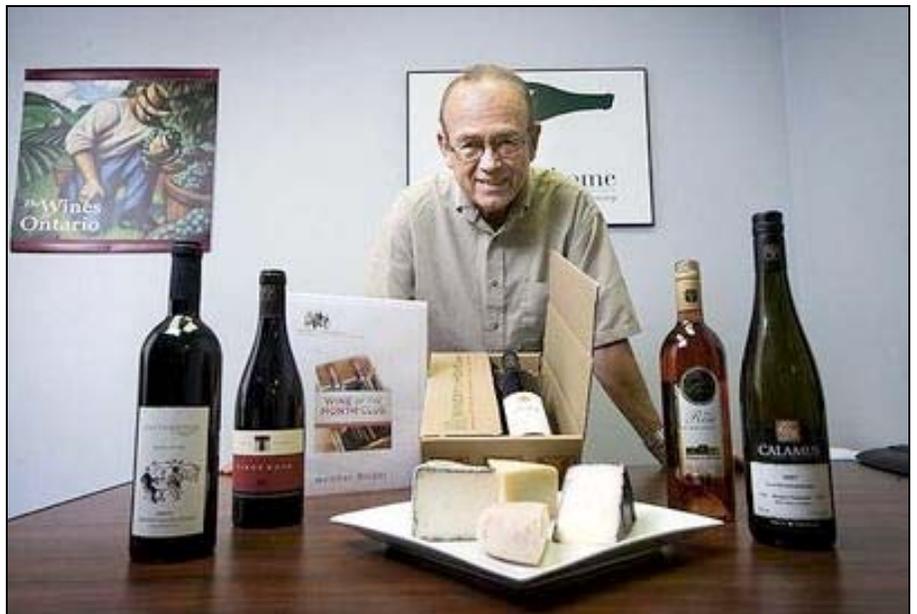
Take Ontario. Yes, there's a small cross-section in stores, dominated by the larger wineries. But the best small local producers do not make enough to stock LCBO shelves.

Emerging wine region Prince Edward County, with 14 wineries, is invisible. Where are the cult wines of British Columbia? Hundreds of Canadian wines are simply not stocked.

And the wine giants like Italy and France and Australia? A symbolic selection. If you discover a fabulous wine on a trip to Tuscany, it is a frustrating struggle to find an agent and try to get it into the country. So, what's a wine lover to do?

Fans of Ontario wines have discovered that many of our local wineries allow you to order from their websites and they will ship to your home or office. For foreign wines, you can hook up with a wine agent (there are hundreds) and buy private or consignment wines, by the case, that are not on LCBO shelves, usually selected by the agent in trips to producers he represents in wine countries. A growing number of folks are charting a path beyond LCBO shelves.

Here are just three of the more enterprising alternatives.



AARON VINCENT ELKAIM/TORONTO STAR  
Doug Towers' WineryToHome sources from the four Ontario wine regions.

## The Opimum Society

Now celebrating its 35th year, this is the pioneer in sourcing wines from the world not available in Canada. And, at 18,000 members, it is the largest wine club in Canada, with chapters spilling across all provinces and territories.

The word Opimum derives from Roman consul Lucius Opimius, c. 121 BC, who encountered a vintage that was so superb, it was only sent to the homes of discriminating wine lovers. The namesake society was founded in 1973.

Sourcing the wines since Day 1 has been the gleeful task of Kenneth Christie, a master of wine in England who, sometimes with a tasting panel, makes selections from world wineries. The goal is to find value as well as quality.

The society is divided into 25 regions across Canada, each with a volunteer representative. These folks also organize local tasting events, creating a social dimension to membership where friendships are sometimes formed for life.

Eight times a year, catalogues offering 50 to 60 wines are mailed to members with selections from two or three wine-growing countries. What you order is up to you, from affordable to premium selections, but the minimum order is a mixed case of six or 12 bottles.

Opimum has always co-operated with local alcohol monopolies. In Ontario, the LCBO brings the wine in and members, after receiving an Opimum pickup notice, go to their nearest LCBO store to get their order. Last year, wine orders by members nudged the \$20 million mark. To join, call 1-800-361-9421, or sign up at opim.ca. There's a one-time initiation fee of \$40, plus \$69 annual dues. Membership includes a subscription to Wine Tidings magazine.

## Winerytohome

Back in 2003, few Ontario wineries were delivering directly to consumers, so this website was launched as "the first third-party online wine seller in Canada," according to founder and president Doug Towers. The idea was to make it easy for wine lovers to obtain hard-to-find Ontario wines that were otherwise unavailable.

"As an Ontario wine retailer, we don't really work with the LCBO," says Towers, "but we are, of course, fully licensed by the AGCO (Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario)."

WineryToHome launched with 10 winery "partners" and 175 Ontario brands. That has grown to 41 wineries and 400 brands at any one time. Towers sources from the four Ontario wine regions – Lake Erie North Shore, Niagara, Prince Edward County and Pelee Island – plus wineries in the Toronto area.

"We have become the largest VQA marketplace in Canada," he says.

## WINE CLUBS BOOST SALES

Many Ontario wineries offer email newsletters that alert patrons to new releases and special deals for wine delivery to your home. And several Ontario wineries have "wine clubs" as part of their selling agenda on websites. Here's just a small sampling:

- **Hillebrand Winery's Club** has special tasting and dining events for members only. Six months for \$228 includes two bottles chosen by the winemaker sent each month to your home.
- **Peller Estates Wine Club** delivers two bottles of premium wine each month to members' doors and allows access to special tasting privileges and events at the winery. Cost is \$45 a month or \$540 a year.
- **Angels Gate** offers an annual Barrel Club membership for \$1,150 with library wine tastings, winemaker's dinners and your personal name plate on a barrel. You can immediately redeem the \$1,150 for wine as an option.
- **Coyote's Run Wine Club** offers four bottles of wine shipped to your home or office four times a year at prices ranging from \$50 to \$120 per shipment, depending on what you order.

The wines are reviewed and rated by well-known wine critics before being offered online. They are then listed on the website in a wide range of packages, from affordable to premium level. Customers can buy as few as two bottles at a time from each winery, with no maximum.

A popular addition is the "Wine of the Month Club," which sends two of the latest and best new wine releases to subscribers each month. An added feature since 2005 is the optional inclusion of matching artisanal cheeses, sourced from six Canadian provinces and reviewed by cheese expert Kathy Guidi.

Canada Post Xpresspost delivers to homes throughout Ontario, starting at \$6.95 for six bottles.

For more information, go to [winerytohome.com](http://winerytohome.com). Towers is a former computer systems designer and the site is very user friendly.

### **WineOnline.ca**

This online wine retailer set up its Web operations in 2004 in Ontario and recently expanded to Nova Scotia. The site partnered this year with Vancouver-based Trialto Wine Group, with the ultimate goal of becoming the largest online retailer of wine in Canada.

The company is actually a wine agency offering Ontario and foreign wines through the LCBO consignment program.

The difference is its strong Internet platform and heavy focus on delivery to your home or office.

"None of the imported product we sell is available at the LCBO," says co-founder and president Aaron. Bick, but he notes that the LCBO caps the quantity of consignment wines any agency can have, "so we are limited to 650 cases at any one time."

WineOnline tries to maintain at least 100 imported wines on the website, he says.

In searching the globe for wines to add to its Web stable, the agency has two very contrasting missions. First, it seeks out great value wines, often sourcing from smaller producers, for the site's popular under-\$25-a-bottle program. Second, the company tries to land premium wines that have achieved stellar critical ratings but are not available in this province. A further focus is organic and biodynamic wines for the health-conscious consumer.

Because WineOnline must obey LCBO regulations, "we are effectively required to sell wine by the case, which is not particularly consumer-friendly," says Bick. He points out that Nova Scotia is a bit more accommodating. There, his online service can even deliver single bottles to customers' doors.

Delivery charges range from \$11 per case in the GTA to \$18 in remote rural areas of Ontario. Delivery via Canada Post takes one to four days. See [wineonline.ca](http://wineonline.ca) for more details.

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- **Creekside Estate Winery's Barrel Club** includes tastings of rare small-batch blends and back vintages, and discounts during a three-year membership "contract" for \$1,485.

- **Fielding Estate Winery's Club** gives pre-release pricing on upcoming wines, special events and complimentary shipping on orders of \$200 or more for \$330 a year membership.

- **Flat Rock Cellars "Club on the Rock"** confers many discounts for \$50 a year, including "In the Winemaker's Boots" workshops with winemakers during harvest, fermentation, and other stages of winemaking.

- **Jackson-Triggs Vintners Collector's Club** has two levels, the Enthusiast (two bottles for \$55 a month) or the Entertainer (six bottles for \$160 a month) delivered to your home.

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