

# New local winery is set to uncork

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## Oak Heights first winery in East Northumberland

by Paul Dalby  
THE INDEPENDENT

**T**HERE'S A NEW KIND of cash crop going into the ground at a farm just west of Warkworth - traditional fields of corn have been ploughed under to make way for acres of grape vines.

This is the new Oak Heights Winery, the first winery in east Northumberland County that's opening its doors to the public at the end of July.

The winery is located on a ridge next to County Road 29, seven kilometres west of Warkworth in the long-forgotten hamlet of Oak Heights.

Now brand new blue road signs for "Oak Heights" have been erected either side of the new winery by the Northumberland economic development department.

### Hive of activity

The property itself has been a hive of activity in recent weeks as an engineering crew drove through a new access road off County Road 29 right into the property. Former cornfields were ploughed under and planted with new vines to come on-line in 2009. And the finishing touches were put to converting the farm's old barn, lifted onto new poured concrete foundations and re-faced with board and batten. It will serve as the visitor interpretation centre in full view of the wine fermentation room.

Optimism is running high in Trent Hills that the new winery could be the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle to bring a rush of visitors and their tourism dollars into Northumberland.

The winery is the brainchild of Brampton business entrepreneur Ian Frazer, who bought the old Couvert homestead back in 1997 as "a place to come here on a weekend to relax.

"But then I realized there's sandy clay here on the farm," Mr. Frazer told *The Independent*. In fact, almost a metre of sand, then underneath a deep bed of chalky clay.

On one of his many evenings on the patio in front of the century farmhouse, Mr. Frazer turned to his wife and said: "You know what? I think I can grow grapes here."

His wife's response was very much to the point: "Are you crazy?" Apparently not!

Mr. Frazer, 66, whose company provides contract sales personnel to the pharmaceutical industry, sent a soil sample to be tested at the University of Guelph. Back came the analysis he had been hoping: "Yes, you can grow grapes in this soil but plant a hardy grape because you have a short growing season."

"They warned me that the harsh winters would be a problem as we are pretty far north," Mr. Frazer said. "But I enjoy a challenge and the achievement that follows. I decided I was going to try this."

Fact-finding trips followed to Brock University, home to eastern Canada's premier viticulture program studying cool climate wine production.

Mr. Frazer had planted first 500 vines at the farm in the year 2000 with the help of his running mates from his marathon club.

Even a harsh flash-freeze winter failed to kill all of them and four years ago the would-be winemaker planted another 4,000 vine plants. Again back-to-back extreme cold winters claimed 75 per cent of the vines.

### Hard winter test

"Some people would say it's time to give up, but I had come so far I wanted to try again," Mr. Frazer said.

He learned from the Niagara wine producers about "triple-hilling" soil in three levels around the base of the vines for extra protection against frost. The next hard winter his vines survived in tact.

At this point Mr. Frazer knew he needed professional help, a team to turn his hobby into a going business.

He found winemaker Mike Traynor, as well as his assistant winemaker and farm manager, all working together in Prince Edward

County maintaining other wineries.

"But they loved this place, saw the potential and came to work for me full-time," he said. "They pulled in a great harvest for me last year so then I had to go out and buy all the good equipment to produce the wine. I am so pleased with the wine Mike has made."

Mr. Traynor, 29, was the first employee of the now well-respected Huff Estates Winery and later winemaker at Willow Springs Winery, both in Prince Edward County. He knows he will face stiff competition from his old stomping ground - Prince Edward just received a boost from the province, which made it a designated viticultural area like Niagara and Pelee.

### Champagne surprise

Unfazed, Mr. Traynor will be blending a full slate of red and white wines with grapes imported from both Prince Edward County and Niagara.

But the top "calling card" of the Oak Heights Winery will be a dry champagne-style sparkling wine.

"Oak Heights has planted extensively with the three key grapes that produce champagne - Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier," Mr. Traynor said. "Our soils are very well suited to it. They are very high in pH level. Prince Edward County is typically rated at 7 pH but our soil at Oak Heights is rated at 8."

Another key member recruited to the Oak Heights team was executive chef Peter Gosling, formerly of the Milford Inn and Spa, Jonathan's of Oakville, his own bistro Goslings in Brampton, and recently Cobourg's King George Inn.

"Everything will come off the barbecue and I thought that, because we are out in beautiful countryside, we should be outdoors to cook, using locally-bred trout and wild salmon," Mr. Gosling said.

"We have to be different, why else would people come here if we weren't," he explained. "We want to be a destination."

ENOUGH  
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