

# Ontario Wine and Culinary Tourism Strategy

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Recreation (MTCR) and the Wine Council of Ontario (WCO) commissioned the preparation of an Ontario Wine and Culinary Tourism Strategy and Action Plan early in 2001. The province's wine and culinary sectors have shown significant growth in the past decade and related tourism activity has also increased, particularly in the Niagara Region. Wine tourism and culinary tourism have been identified as sectors that could be drivers for increased tourism in the province, both in terms of attracting more visitors but also in extending the length of stay and spending of current visitors.

The general purpose of the assignment was to undertake a review of existing wine, culinary and wine/culinary tourism activities, identify areas for growth and make recommendations with respect to an action plan that will develop wine, culinary and wine/culinary tourism and expand tourism growth in Ontario.

The Economic Planning Group of Canada (EPG), in association with Margaret Swaine, noted wine journalist and author, was retained to prepare the strategy.

The Strategy for Wine and Culinary Tourism in Ontario is presented in two documents. The Strategy and Action Plan Final Report summarizes the research findings and presents the strategy and implementation plan, and the Background Report provides details of the market analysis, case studies on comparable destinations, product inventory, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis and the results of interviews with tour operators.

To view the final report and the background report online, please contact the Wine Council at (905) 684-8070 for a CD copy.

## Definition

Wine and culinary tourism is defined as tourism in which the opportunity for wine and/or culinary related experiences contributes significantly to the reason for travel to the destination or to itinerary planning while at the destination.

## The Vision

The overall vision for wine and culinary tourism in Ontario is proposed to be as follows:

*Establish Ontario as a quality wine and culinary tourism destination  
in both domestic and international markets.*

## The Overall Strategy

The following overall strategy is proposed:

- *Establish compelling, high quality experiences for visitors, targeting high yield visitors for whom wine and culinary experiences are a lifestyle choice, and who have a high propensity to travel for such experiences. Different strategies will be employed for the Ontario market, the cross-border US market and longer-haul Canadian and international markets.*
- *Build on the world class wine-making, agricultural and culinary capabilities of the Niagara region, on the diverse and multi-cultural dining opportunities available in Toronto, and on the unique cultural and culinary offerings of selected communities and destinations in the province.*
- *Build on the many complementary tourism attractions and visitor appeals in these areas of the province.*

It is clear from the inventory of culinary and wine tourism resources in the province, that the different regions and communities within the province, and the different kinds of product offerings, have uniquely different kinds of market opportunities and significantly different scope of tourism potential. As a result, the best approach is not a pan-provincial one, but rather, one that involves a number of sub-strategies, accompanied by several province-wide initiatives that support the various sub-strategies.

There are two destinations in Ontario that currently have a sufficiently strong base on which to grow wine and culinary tourism in a substantial fashion. These are the Niagara Region and Toronto.

They are both developed in wine (Niagara) and culinary (Toronto) product offerings, their products are closely clustered geographically, and they enjoy advantages in terms of national and cross-border air and road access. The Niagara Region and Toronto each have the critical mass necessary for developing medium-haul and long-haul tourism markets.

Both Niagara and Toronto will need three somewhat different strategies when it comes to market development - one focussed on regional markets in Ontario, another for US cross-border markets and Quebec, and another for longer haul markets. Highlights of the recommended strategies for the Niagara Region and Toronto are presented below.

## The Recommended Strategy for the Niagara Region

The Niagara Region, long one of Ontario's major tourism destinations, has seen a diversification in its tourism product over the past ten years, and wine-related tourism is one of the key emerging products that is contributing to the strengthening of the region as a tourism destination with appeals to a variety of market segments. While tourism associated with wineries has shown significant growth, there are a variety of challenges that need to be addressed as well as opportunities to be capitalized on if the industry is to achieve its potential in the tourism marketplace. Priority product and infrastructure development recommendations initiatives are identified below.

- Establish an annual internationally recognized “signature event” to raise Niagara’s profile as an international quality wine destination and to attract high yield visitors to the region for a wine and culinary experience
- Enhance the Wine Route experience
  - Establish Wine Country signs on the QEW
  - Develop two sub-brands under the Wine Route brand - one for ANiagara-on-the-Lake@, the other for the AEscarpment@
  - Add additional wine route signs
  - Develop a wine route guidebook (released in Summer 2001)
  - Improve the wine route map
- Develop packages and itineraries
  - 101 Wine and Culinary Adventures in Niagara - half day to multi-day experiences in a mix and match, modular format
  - Wine and Culinary Vacations in Niagara; 2 - 7 day destination vacation packages
- Establish selected communities as hubs for wine and culinary experiences, and the primary focus for the development of accommodations and other services for visitors.
- Encourage the private sector to establish more accommodation in the region, particularly quality inns and character properties, and particularly in the western part of the region.
- Develop a diverse mix of wine and culinary-based learning packages to cater to short term leisure visitors as well as multi-day destination markets.
- Develop experiences targeting the corporate and group markets as well as incentive travel markets.
- Focus on a smaller number of quality events that will attract visitors, with a focus on the early spring and late fall periods.

- Undertake a detailed feasibility study on the wine discovery centre concept.
- Pursue proposals for a new-mid peninsula highway as well as other transportation modes that can provide improved access to the Niagara Region for wine and culinary tourists.
- Establish a number of quality standards programs, initially including a basic market-readiness standards program for wineries, along with an ‘Awards of Distinction’ program for restaurants, and an awards program for outstanding customer service for front line personnel.
- Introduce a ‘tourism strategies outreach program’ for the management of wineries, restaurants, cooking schools and other stakeholders to assist them in developing a better understanding of tourism success strategies and their benefits.
- Increase the level of training of front line staff throughout the tourism sector, in customer service and in their knowledge of the Niagara Region. Introduce a more in-depth wine knowledge and customer service training program for winery staff.
- Undertake a special study to identify models for ‘sustainable’ tourism-related development on protected lands (e.g. the Niagara Escarpment and agricultural lands) addressing issues such as environmental quality standards, viable business models and appropriate limits and guidelines for approving development on protected lands.

The detailed report also provides some general market development strategies, incorporating a focus on pursuing those target markets that offer the most potential.

## **The Recommended Strategy for Toronto**

Toronto’s particular strengths as a tourism destination include its cultural diversity and its cosmopolitan appeals, as well as its diverse culinary offer. To date, however, there has not been a major focus on culinary experiences as part of the tourism sell for the city. Priority product and infrastructure development recommendations for Toronto are identified below.

- Develop dine-around packages targeted to both pleasure markets and meetings and convention markets. These could include:
  - Ethnic cuisine themed dine-around packages
  - Toronto’s Best Restaurants package
  - Gourmet tour of Toronto
  - Restaurants that feature Ontario’s wines
- Develop a series of culinary adventure packages in Toronto.
- Develop more ethnic community-based tourism, with a focus on the ethnic culinary experiences available in the city.

- Strengthen the appeal for visitors markets of festivals and events that have a wine and/or culinary focus, such as Santé, Festival Caravan.
- Brand Toronto as a destination offering Fine Cuisine.
- Strengthen the links between Ontario's wines and cuisine in Toronto, through partnerships with the wineries and the WCO, promotions of wine/culinary tourism in LCBO outlets and working with hotels to host Ontario Wine Festivals.
- Establish an Ontario food, wine and cuisine discovery centre in Toronto, including information on culinary and wine adventures and itineraries, as well as displays on Ontario foods and wines, a demonstration winery and tasting facilities and a demonstration kitchen.
- Establish urban culinary learning packages, working with private cooking schools and post-secondary institutions.
- As with the Niagara Region, introduce an 'Awards of Distinction' program for restaurants and an awards program for customer service by front line staff, as well as enhanced training in customer service and knowledge of Ontario wines and foods.

### **Other Products and Destinations in Ontario**

Beyond the Niagara Region and Toronto, there are a number of other communities and areas, as well as the network of quality inns in the province, the major resorts and some other businesses, that have potential in this market, albeit of somewhat lesser proportions. In the case of the network of inns (members of the Innkeepers of Ontario), they already have well-established wine and culinary tourism offerings and packages, so their emphasis would be on strengthening the experiential components of their offerings so as to establish niche products for the FIT (fully independent traveller) market, and on marketing and market development.

And finally, there are other areas and products in Ontario that have latent potential, but that require more development before they can contribute significantly to wine and/or culinary tourism in Ontario. These include Essex County and Pelee Island where there are several wineries but limited complementary experiences and tourism services, as well as Prince Edward County, which is just beginning to develop a wine industry.