

# REMPPEL UNCORKED

Swirling, sniffing and sipping the best of Canada with sommelier and Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification Michelle Rempel.

BY ASHA HINGORANI

Canada's Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification, Michelle Rempel, who represents Calgary Centre-North, Alta., is a certified sommelier who, without doubt, knows a thing or two about what Canada's vineyards have to offer.

When asked to recommend some of her favourite Canadian wines to *Power & Influence*, Ms. Rempel does not disappoint.

Bringing in Andrew Rastapkevicius, a wine agent with Lifford Wine & Spirits and blogger on *Capitalwine.ca*, Ms. Rempel unveils some of Canada's best-kept secrets.

Ms. Rempel and Mr. Rastapkevicius uncork eight wines, all different varietals, from Canada's most popular wine regions.

Included in the tasting are a 2012 rosé from Joie Farm, Naramata Bench, Okanagan, B.C.; 2011 Blanc de Blanc from Hinterland Wine Co., Prince Edward County VQA; 2010 Capella from Clos du Soleil, Similkameen Valley, B.C.; 2010 Cidre de Glace 'Cryomalus' from Antolino Brongo, Saint-Joseph-du-Lac, Que.; 2010 chardonnay from Bachelder, Niagara Peninsula VQA; 2010 'Red Icon' from Painted Rock, Skaha Lake, Okanagan B.C.; 2011 pinot noir 'County Unfiltered' from Norman Hardie, Prince Edward County VQA; and 2011 cabernet franc 'Grower's Blend' from Tawse Winery, Niagara Peninsula, VQA.

Ms. Rempel, who earned her sommelier credentials at the Wine and Spirits Education Trust in the United Kingdom, said she often gets hit up for wine advice.

"I feel like wine on-star sometimes," she says.

"It's interesting because it's not just about the advice, with my colleagues and a lot of the people I hang out with; wine is not just about taste or alcohol, it's about understanding that wine in and of itself is an art. There is more enjoyment in wine when you think about pairing with the right food or when are you going to drink a wine in terms of its age or what you like as a consumer. It's not a rye and coke, it's artisan, it's of the land, especially in Canada," says Ms. Rempel.

While swirling, sniffing and sipping out of fine Riedel glasses to match each varietal, Ms. Rempel explains that she is really taken with and has fallen for Niagara region wine.

"When I was taking some of the WSET courses, towards the end of the advanced, my wine teacher

**Somebody's gotta do it:** Michelle Rempel, who earned her sommelier credentials at the Wine and Spirits Education Trust in the U.K., says she often gets hit up for wine advice. 'I feel like wine on-star sometimes.'

Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

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told me to really find my thing, you know, people specialize in Tuscans or Bordeauxs or that kind of thing. I think, because of proximity, my thing has really become the Niagara region wine,” she says.

Ms. Rempel says when she was a Parliamentary secretary she was often in the House on Fridays and at times had early Monday morning briefings, so she would use the weekend to stay in Ottawa and work, but often had an opportunity to travel down to Prince Edward County or the Niagara region wineries.

“I think I’ve really fallen in love with Niagara wines and Prince Edward County is doing some amazing things. But that said, I cannot believe how much the Okanagan has come up and come on stream in the last five years. I mean, two completely different climates, completely different soil profiles, different expression of the varietals, it’s like comparing apples to oranges. I think the commonality is Canada has come such a long way; it’s more than just ice wine. As a country, we’re producing wines that can stand up to any similar regions they’re grown in,” she says.

In terms of her personal palate Ms. Rempel says that her own cellar primarily consists of burgundy varietals.

“Pinot and chardonnay; that’s where my palate tends to gravitate. You know, really minerally, reductive forms of chardonnay, that’s my go-to, that’s what I prefer,” she says.

While sipping on Norman Hardie’s 2011 pinot and soothing over the balanced acidity, intense aromas and silky finish, Ms. Rempel says she’s often the one who gets the wine list handed to her in a restaurant, but sometimes she’ll grab it because she’ll want a pinot or a chardonnay. “I often end up imposing my taste on my friends,” she says.

Ms. Rempel explains that being able to navigate and understand a wine list is a good business skill.

“If I’m talking to anyone coming out of first-year business school, I would tell them to learn your way around a wine list, because dinner is part of business and if you can understand how that works, it’s a positive thing,” says Ms. Rempel.

When asked what would be the best way to help promote Canadian wine, Mr.

Rastapkevicius jumps to express his knowledge of the industry through a market perspective.

“I think the wineries are doing a great job of promoting themselves. The biggest thing that’s hindering the promotion of Canadian wine is the legislative side of things. If wine were more equally accessible throughout Canada I think it would more or less take care of itself. Restaurants and publications are what people look to for a serious understanding of what’s going on and what’s being promoted on the shelves,” says Mr. Rastapkevicius.

Ms. Rempel adds, “On the legislative side, with the impact of Bill C-311, we do need the provinces to align with that. Anytime you can create a domestic market for a product, it’s a good thing. The Canadian wine industry

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creates \$6.8-billion of economic benefit to the country, that’s either through the production of wine, restaurant mark ups, wine tourism. This is an important industry for the country and it’s not just agriculture. It’s very important that we as legislators look at every way possible to make sure we’re not creating artificial barriers for this industry to grow.”

In the summer Cabinet shuffle of 2013, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) promoted Ms. Rempel from Parliamentary secretary to the minister of the environment to Canada’s Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification. *Power & Influence* asked the minister of state if she could use the power of her position and knowledge to help promote Canadian wine.

“I think when people look at Western Canada they think of some of the natural strengths we have, obviously the energy industry, our natural resources industry but there’s a lot of untold stories in Western Canada of other successful industries. Often in interviews like this I get to talk about our aerospace sector or our biotechnology sector or clean-tech, but, as I mentioned earlier, wine is a huge economic contributor. I think it is



Photographs by Jake Wright, The Hill Times



Andrew Rastapkevicius, left, an Ottawa wine agent, says it would help Canada's wine industry if wines were equally accessible across the country.

Michelle Rempel, lower left, a certified sommelier, says pinot and chardonnay wines are her favourites.

an important economic diversification agent for Western Canada. It's not just about the agricultural component it's about the fact that when you drive down into Kelowna and down to Osoyoos, that whole region is set up for wine tourism now," says Ms. Rempel.

She adds that her department in the past has supported institutions including the wine research institute at the University of British Columbia. "The mandate of the department is to accelerate emerging industries where there is existing or centric capacity and that is certainly true of B.C. wine," she says.

During the discussion on politics and wine, and manoeuvring around the tasting glasses in an effort to pick up a glass of the sweet 2010 Cidre de Glace 'Cryomalus' from Antolino Brongo, Saint-Joseph-du-Lac, Que., Ms. Rempel explains that, like in any job or professional role, throwing alcohol into a situation must be done in a responsible way.

"Any producer that made these wines, and I think anyone would say this, they are to be enjoyed in moderation. You know, I'm always cognizant if I'm sitting down having a glass of wine I'm not going to drive. But I hope I have conveyed that wine is something that should be celebrated, it's more than sitting down for a drink, it's understood it's all about the context and I think that wine is something that can augment the experience of food or a celebration," says Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Rempel and Mr. Rastapkevicius are involved and co-hosts of an invitation-only wine tasting group on an approximate monthly basis in Ottawa. More information can be found on the 'Society' page of [capitalwine.ca](http://capitalwine.ca). Ms. Rempel says she received approval from the ethics commissioner to be involved. The tasting group is meant to give prospective buyers a look and taste of interesting wines that aren't regularly available at the LCBO. ■



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