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Chair, Grape Growers of Ontario 2002-2003

Well, when I went on the board, it was in '87. It was right when free trade was signed by [Prime Minister] Brian Mulroney. It was a total change in the grape industry. We went from Labrusca to the Vinifera and the difference in wines.

Back in the '70s, we were shipping upwards of 90,000 tons of grapes a year. Mostly Labrusca and juice grapes. In '87, it changed as part of the Tanner Report. We pulled out all the Labrusca, except the juice grapes, and by '96, the only juice plant in Canada announced they were closing. We, as a board, were pretty upset, because we still had at least 15,000 tons of juice grapes going. What do you do?



We went out and formed a committee which I was on that found other markets in the states. That was the biggest event of my life, I guess. Both Welch's and Cliffstar wanted all of our grapes. They would take all of them from Canada. So, we presented it to the growers at a general meeting. Cliffstar, Welch's, I think there was one other that had their presentation. The juice plant here all of a sudden promised they weren't really going to close.

It stayed open 11 years almost. So, all of the juice grapes didn't go to the States. About half of them stayed here. Half of us went to the U.S., to Welch's. That lasted until the juice plant announced they were going to close. We stayed with Welch's U.S. until just a couple of years ago, when the states banned Canadian grapes in their product.

We had signed a lifetime contract for all we could grow on a certain number of acres. They paid us off, not as generously as the Labrusca program paid off in '87. But we were paid to cancel, there was no more market. That was the end of the juice industry. My wife went to ten stores, last week, looking for grape juice. There was not one bottle of grape juice to be had in St. Catharines, by anybody. Welch's or anybody. You cannot find any kind of grape juice on the market - go into Shoppers, go into any of the grocery stores, and you won't find grape juice.

My farm is in Effingham, near Fonthill; halfway between St. Catharines and Fonthill.

We live on 92 acres. But we have no grapes anymore. When Welch's closed to Canadian grapes in the States, we had to rip out the vines. I tried selling pick your own Concords, I spent \$250 for signs to put up, and advertising. I sold \$25 in two years. People who wanted to come and pick their own. Mostly it was neighbors who came, and they picked them for nothing. So, the signs went, and the grapes went. That's the difference. I had shipped to the juice plant here since 1963, when my wife and I got married and bought our first farm with juice grapes. At one time, we were the biggest juice grower in Canada, in the late '70s.

Then when the free trade was passed and the Tanner Report was released the Labruscas ended, we had to rip them out because there was no more market. We just planted 30 acres of grapes at about \$10,000 an acre. We had to rip them out for \$3,000 an acre. We had just bought another 65 acres near us, and we were up to over 150 acres of grapes at the time. 100 of them came out with the Labrusca program. But when you spend \$10,000 an acre to get them into production, and you get \$3,000 an acre, you're left with a big debt.

What's the old saying? When you are given lemons, you make lemonade. So, we changed, and our farm was not suitable for the Vinifera varieties. We knew that. We were just up the escarpment. They do very well down below. But people with a lot more knowledge than us have tried Vinifera up here, and they just end up tearing them out.

It's still a constant change even for a Vinifera grower because you have a market for one thing, and it's doing really well. Everybody goes out and plants. Then all of a sudden there is a surplus.

It's been like that for the last 75 years. Consumer tastes change, and you have to adapt. That's why I always felt it was good to have ... We had 15 varieties in four different locations on our farms. One variety one year would do really well, and the next, five years later, you pull them out. It was the same with all the Labruscas. You couldn't grow enough Agawam. Everybody was paying you to plant Agawam, or Catawba, or, those weren't even juice grapes. Those were wine grapes back in the '60s and '70s. The wineries would beg you. We had wineries give us vines to plant back in the '70s. We planted them, and before they were in, they were telling us there was no market for them.

They'd give us the vines. It's still doing the same thing. People rush out, and they plant, and unless you have a wide variety of grapes, you're not going to have a market. If you only grow one variety, eventually the consumer tastes will change, and the wineries aren't going to buy something they can't sell.

I liked being Chair, if only for one year. I gave what I could. I always figured if I was on a board, I was going to take an active interest in that board. But that year, I was vice chair of the Grape and Wine Festival, I was on the directors of the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers and I was on about six different committees. I just got up in the morning and ran all day, every day. I was out of the wine industry, and everything was concentrated on the wine industry then. It made sense to transition to leadership that was still growing grapes.

Back in the '60s, there were only six wineries. That was a lot. Now there is, what, 150 wineries in Ontario. It's gotten away from the Brights, Jordan, London. The industry has changed completely; when we started in '63, Concord was king. You couldn't grow enough.

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