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I became minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs in 2010, but coming from Huron County, I was not that familiar with the wine industry, but was very familiar with agriculture. I soon discovered that the wine industry takes it to a whole new level.

The complexities of it, but it's so exciting. When you think about how far they've come in such a short time, because in farming 75 years is a blink of an eye, when you think about what the land can yield. And from its very humble beginnings to where it is today, it's absolutely remarkable how far they've come. And that's with having leadership that understands the tools that they need. And then, being able to tell the story to the politicians, who if they were willing to listen and act upon, can be very helpful. That's how the Ontario Vineyard Improvement Program happened.

I came up through the ranks of municipal government and up into the regional, which is county level and wardens. And so, I did all of that and learned how important it is. A number of my family members are in agriculture, mostly grain and oil seeds. And, in a county like Huron, that is our number one economic driver, agriculture.

I was in Niagara on the weekend, and there are even more wineries than when I was last there. I've been in St. Catharines for meetings and that type of thing, but actually, having the time to be able to drive around and have a look of course, this time of year with the heat, it was just gorgeous.

The whole feeling in the community has such vibrancy, such life, and the amount of people that were there – I mean it was just packed – and the people were really enjoying the wineries. Growing the grapes is the beginning of the journey, but when you look at the whole package and the contribution to the province, it's absolutely incredible. And to that region, there's certainly wine being produced and grapes being grown in other regions, but Niagara is where the journey began. So, it's quite exciting when you see how it's evolved. There're so many different facets.

Well, in any agriculture, the challenges are often the trade issues. That's still an issue today, but for me, my consideration was what will this industry look like 25 years down the road? What are the tools that they need today, to make sure that the quality of product is world renowned? And how do we grow in that way?

What the industry needed first was stabilization, and so we created a risk management program for the grapes. Then we added a program for equipment and equipment upgrades.

It was a recognition by the government of the tools that they need to assist growers to get where they want to go. Where did they see themselves? The Grape Growers had a strategic plan which was unusual for agriculture to move in that manner. They've been very forward thinking. I give them so much credit for that.

And well, it's very sexy, right? It's a very glamorous industry.

They were not the only commodity that was having challenges. There was stress in other commodities between the processors and the producers. There were different solutions to each one, but certainly with the grapes there was strong support from the government, because the growers were so organized and because what they bring to the province is so positive.

Once you have an established program, then you can sell it on the results. But when you're beginning, as we were with the Vineyard Improvement Program, there has to be trust, and the premier, Dalton McGuinty, he felt there was enormous potential with the industry. I can tell you, it's a lot easier if you have the premier swinging on your side. In fact, it's amazing how the cabinet meetings go so much differently if the premier says, "Yes."

I often think about how much our pallets have changed with the industry. When you think about Baby Duck and you think about how much we've grown from that. That's incredible.

It was funny, because my sister, she liked wine and she'd started with Baby Duck and that type of thing. And then, it wasn't long that we were looking for something different than that. We were able to grow with the industry.

Another asset in the support of the industry was another member in the liberal caucus, Jim Bradley, who became the legislature's wine secretary. Nothing happened in the industry without Jim's say so. I'm telling little secrets now, but he was a very strong supporter. We also had the wine caucus. And that was really good. We had people from the industry come in and talk their wines, and about their vineyards. In the process our palettes were challenged and educated – we had a better understanding of what made a difference of quality. The legislative assembly began picking the wines for the dining room, and the people that work in the dining room, they take a great deal of pride in these fine Ontario products. When you bring guests to the dining room, they always tell the story. So, there's a lot of pride about being able to point to the quality of product.

In order to make sure that your share of the pie continues to grow, you always have to be looking at what is it that you're going to need for the next step. What is it that people will want from their wines? When we look at gin and how it's changed with producing quality local products, and also the craft breweries, we see similar examples of an industry growing through improved local products and through educating consumer tastes.

I think that the Grape Growers have been very good at identifying, explaining and melding their priorities with the government's priorities, whatever stripe of government is in at that time. We had trust with the Grape Growers. And you don't get handed trust, you earn it.

The Grape Growers, they understand that. I've been working with the Grape Growers for a lot of years, and they are very good about talking about how it feels for them on the family farm, and how their farms have evolved over the years and how important it is to bring the young people in and to keep them engaged, and then talk about what the future holds and what it is that they will expect, in their product that they're going to be working very hard. I mean, you have to love the land. You have to love your job, because you're risking a lot. When you put your money down on your farm, you are at risk, and you do it with good faith, but it's going to take a lot of hard work and it's going to take a lot of years to build up your business.

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