

Ziraldo back where he began: at Inniskillin

**Mike Balsom
Special to The Local**

Creating a great wine starts with the roots, and one legend of the local wine industry is returning to his.

Donald Ziraldo announced this month that his Ziraldo Estate icewine will now be produced at Inniskillin, the winery he co-founded with the late Karl Kaiser in 1975.

"It was a long time coming," Ziraldo says from his Niagara-on-the-Lake home.

"Two years ago the Teachers Pension Fund bought the Canadian operations of Constellation (including Inniskillin)," he explains. "(Arterra President) Jay Wright came to me and said 'Donald, we'd like to do a video and revitalize the brand.' I gave him two conditions. One, he had to fix the winery up. And then I

said I would like to move my production from Reif to Inniskillin."

Though the man who first had the vision to plant vinifera grapes in the region in 1974 was happy with his agreement with Klaus Reif, he admits there was often much confusion when visitors to Reif Estate came across bottles marked with the distinctive Ziraldo art deco labels.

The move to where it all started will alleviate that confusion.

Ziraldo is pleased as punch to be working with Arterra's head winemaker Marco Piccoli, who hails from the same Friuli region of Italy as Ziraldo's parents. Piccoli arrived in Niagara in the early 2000s as a student from Italy's University of Udine. Ziraldo connected with him via his role with Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI).

Piccoli also studied in Germany, where his interest in icewine was further piqued. In 2004, he interned at Inniskillin, then rose through the ranks at Jackson-Triggs and Constellation.

"I picked him (to produce the new vintages), because he's kind of my protege," Ziraldo says. "He's from Friuli, and we speak the same language, and we've done the collaboration with CCOVI and Udine. And



The pandemic has made more time for Donald Ziraldo to stay close to home, and enjoy the vineyards with his son Aspen. (Photos supplied)

I wanted somebody to distinguish it, so the wine is made by another artist, because this will make it distinct."

Back when Ziraldo split from Inniskillin, he planted a vineyard of riesling grapes near the original old barn, and that continues to be the basis of the Ziraldo Estate wines. The first collaboration between the two Friuliani, the 2019 Vidal Icewine currently being bottled, will be released in mid-summer. This fall will see the 2020 riesling hit the market.

"The 2020 Riesling is still in the tank," explains Ziraldo. "I've tasted it, it's spectacular. It's 308 grams of sugar per litre. The 2020 crop was down by 50 per cent because of the summer drought and the late picking because of the dehydration. It's going to be spectacular quality."

Ziraldo also looks forward to bringing some of the cachet back to his original winery.

"I don't intend to get involved in the day-to-day, I've been there and done that," he says. "When Karl left, when he retired, I packed it in. I stayed for three months with Constellation, but it just didn't fit. But I'm going to go back. I'm right here, it all works out nicely."

In the wine industry, it's always good to have an association with an individual, a face of the winery. "Inniskillin didn't have that anymore," Ziraldo says. "After Karl and I left, Debi Pratt was that for a while, but now she's gone, too. So I will spend some time there."

These past few years, Ziraldo has seen some of his wine pioneer contemporaries pass on. He reflects on them fondly and often.

"Karl was the genius behind icewine," he raves about his former colleague, who died in 2017. "He took something the Germans had been playing with since the 17th century and turned it into a luxury brand. We made a good team. He was a great partner. He made great wine, and I sold it."

Joseph Pohorly is another who comes to mind. "Joe was a character," Ziraldo laughs.

"He did some engineering for Karl, so they were always hanging around together here at the winery. Another one was Ewald Reif, Karl's friend, and Klaus' uncle. They were the ones who were first playing around with icewine."

The pandemic has kept the world traveller grounded here in NOTL, allowing him to spend much more time at home with his son Aspen.

The eight year old, who enjoys helping his father in the vineyard, is currently learning Italian online. Ziraldo knows that pales in comparison to his son being able to immerse himself in the Italian language and lifestyle in the piazzas of Florence.

"I used to spend about 200 days a year outside of Canada," he says. "Most of it in the United States, Europe and Asia. And I had that gig in Portugal for about six years, with a mining company. I haven't been in an airplane now in almost two years."

He also had a vineyard in the town of Fagagna, where his parents were born. There, he planted 1000 vines on the hillside of the Castello, which he harvested in 2008 to produce a Picolit-style Italian dessert wine as a tribute to his parents. The Ziraldo Bianco di Fagagna is available in Italy. Ziraldo would love to return to Friuli to start a more serious, long-term venture.

"We'll head back there this summer when things open up again," he says. "But Italy is in trouble. They're not shipping anything, because export has basically shut down. Tourism has been devastated, and they're just not drinking the wines."

He worries, as well, about the future of the wine and restaurant industries in Canada.

"I know that with Arterra, the premium side of the business is almost non-existent (due to COVID)," Ziraldo claims. "They've gone from one shift producing bag-in-a-box to three shifts. My theory is that people buy wine to show off to their friends. With everyone locked up, you don't have guests, so everybody's

buying bag-in-a-box."

The longer the pandemic lasts, the more the market will shift. He wonders as well how many restaurants will reopen after struggling for so long. And he thinks that what he calls 'the new order' will figure out ways to reinvent the restaurant business, with new protocols for diners.

Ziraldo foresees a modern version of the roaring 20s happening when life gets closer to normal.

"People have got a lot of money," he explains. "You're not travelling, you're not going out for fancy dinners, you're not buying a new suit. All that money is building up in bank accounts."

The fact that the new order will be launched with the 2020 vintage, and a lot of wineries have been helped out by (Prime Minister) Justin Trudeau, should make for a good recovery, he adds.

At the same time Ziraldo acknowledges that many of the workers in his industry and others that have taken the biggest beating financially, as well as farmers, will make for a lot of belt-tightening.

Until the recovery begins, he and Aspen will continue to enjoy their extended time on the Ziraldo estate, Aspen digging trenches in the vineyard, and father and son playing host to barbecues for Aspen and his friends.

To celebrate Ziraldo's return to his roots, Inniskillin will be offering a limited-edition gift-pack featuring the classic 2019 Inniskillin Niagara Estate VQA Riesling Icewine and 2014 Ziraldo VQA Riesling Icewine, produced under his previous arrangement with Reif. This gift-pack will be available for purchase at the Inniskillin Niagara Estate winery boutique in the coming months, as COVID restrictions are lifted.

And when the new vintages are launched, Ziraldo will make the short trek from his home to be on site at Inniskillin, and he'll be lending his persona via their branding messages, returning to his rightful role as the face of the winery that started it all.



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