

Friulan Blood in Canadian Skin

By Donald Ziraldo with Angelo Bolotta

My destiny was carved out for me on my father's gold ring! My father, Fiorello Ziraldo, came to Canada in 1923, through Ellis Island in New York City. He was only 15 years old at the time, but he had already figured out that he needed to cross the ocean to escape the economic depression that had afflicted most of Italy after World War I. His plan was simple – go to America, work very hard, save lots of money and then go back home! He travelled, as a stowaway, in a crowded third class cabin.

Fiorello was born in Fagagna, in the region of Friuli. During the 1920s, many Friulani were coming to America in search of the better life that steady work provided. His ship was filled with fellow Friulani, most with exactly the same game plan. While in New York, one of his friends told him that up north, in Canada, they were looking for miners to work in the gold mines of Timmins, Ontario. Fiorello always associated gold with wealth, so he decided to go to Timmins to be a gold miner.

After 23 years digging in the McIntyre mines, he had saved enough money to buy a parcel of farmland in the Niagara Peninsula. He also bought himself a first class ticket, on an ocean liner, and returned home to Fagagna, in 1947.

While in Fagagna, he met Irma Vittoria Schiratti, who had recently completed her diploma to work as a midwife. It must have been love at first sight because within three months they were married and off on a luxurious honeymoon to New York City's famous *Waldorf Astoria Hotel*. It must have been quite a surprise for her to settle into a life of farming in Niagara, right after this luxurious honeymoon.



Figure 1: Fiorello and Irma on their wedding day in Fagagna, in 1947.
Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

To her credit, Irma Ziraldo adapted quickly to her new life and she was very helpful in setting up the farm. In his heart, my father always wanted to be a farmer, just like his own parents had been back in Friuli. By the time I came along in 1948, my parents were nicely settled into a life of farming. My brother Paul was born in 1950 and Robert was born in 1953 to complete the family.



Figure 2: Irma and Fiorello Ziraldo working on the family farm, circa 1961. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

By example, my parents instilled in us a vigorous work ethic and a deep interest in the family business, *Ziraldo Farms and Nursery*. This was cemented in 1964, when my father died of silicosis. His years in the mines had finally taken their toll! I was only 15 years old, and as the oldest son, I had to assume some serious responsibilities. My mother always insisted education was important and that I needed to go to university. So, I went to *Guelph University* to study agricultural sciences. My mother managed the farm and I came home on weekends to help out.

When I earned my degree in 1971, at the graduation ceremony, my mother gave me a solid gold ring that my father had made from ore he dug in Timmins. With a loving smile, she told me that

he always planned to give me his ring once I grew up. On the ring were carved bunches of grapes growing on a vine stock. As it turns out, my father had my destiny carved onto this ring! This ring is referenced in the dedication to my father in *Anatomy of a Winery*, the first book I wrote. The ring helped convince me to focus my agricultural efforts on winemaking. I went back to Friuli for inspiration.

Friuli and Niagara are at approximately the same latitude. In addition, the microclimate created by Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment provided a hot growing season from June to October and a natural shelter from the cold north winds, especially in winter. I was convinced that similar varieties of wine grapes could be cultivated commercially in Niagara. I began to import some grafting root stock, for our nursery, from the Rauscedo agricultural co-op in Friuli. I was also trained in new grafting techniques.



Figure 3: Karl Kaiser (left) and Donald Ziraldo, inspecting their Inniskillin wine, circa 1980. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

A couple of years later I met Karl Kaiser, and the rest is history. Karl was a recent immigrant from Austria, who was working on a degree in chemistry at *Brock University*, in St. Catharines. He came to buy some European grape varieties to make homemade wine for himself. The indigenous Niagara grapes were hardy, but they produced a mediocre wine with a “foxy” taste. This was something foreign to the European palate. A few years later, Karl’s business proposal was, “I will make the wine and

you will sell it!" When I tasted the wine he made, from the Friulan vines I had supplied him, I was convinced.

After securing the first private winery license in the region since Prohibition (a gap of over 50 years), we co-founded *Inniskillin Wines Inc.* in 1975. We chose the name, at the suggestion of General George Kitching, then chairman of the *Liquor Control Board of Ontario* (LCBO). It was intended as a tribute to the Irish Inniskilling Fusiliers, who fought bravely to defend Niagara farmland during the War of 1812. In 1974, I had planted 30,000 European *Vitis vinifera* vines on additional land I purchased in Niagara-on-the-Lake. In 1977, we made our first premium wine with the Riesling, Chardonnay and Gamay grapes we harvested. Karl and I were very likeminded. We believed only premium grapes could produce quality wine. We refused to do anything that was mediocre! Our dream was to make world class wines.

In 1983, Karl proposed we make Icewine. Given his Austrian background, this was something quite familiar to him. *Eiswein* was first discovered by German winemakers in the mid 1700s. Karl felt our cold climate might be ideal for its production. At the time, I thought he was a little crazy, but it not only worked, it became an iconic Canadian luxury brand.



Figure 4: A vintner carefully examines frozen grapes to determine if they are ready for picking. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

Our Icewine, made from Vidal grapes, became an internationally acclaimed success. In 1991, our *Vidal Icewine* won the prestigious *Grand Prix d'Honneur* at Vinexpo in Bordeaux, France. Years later, we won the equally prestigious *Gran Premio* at Vinitaly. It was an honour for me to promote it, and Canada, around the world. My partner Karl's experience with German Eiswein techniques helped us to take full advantage of Niagara's unique climate.

Making Icewine is a very high risk and expensive venture. Weather conditions must cooperate fully. First, the grapes must remain on the vine well past the normal harvest period (September/October) to maximize the accumulation of sugars. The repeated freezing and thawing of early winter (December/January) concentrates the sugar and acid in the grape juice. Nets are used to protect grapes from hungry birds. Then, at least three successive days of temperatures consistently below -8°C are needed to naturally separate the sugar and acid contents from the hard frozen water particles. Next, the grapes must be picked and processed while still 'frozen on the wine.'



Figure 5: Workers picking Vidal grapes in the late afternoon. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

Often under powerful night lights, teams of well-bundled vintners hand pick the frozen grapes. The frozen grapes are then carefully squeezed to prevent ice from melting and diluting the sugar content. This helps to intensify the flavour. Once the extra-long fermentation period is complete, you have a naturally amber coloured Icewine, a Canadian speciality. This combination and balance of sugar and acid is most pleasing to the palate.



Figure 6: Receiving honorary citizenship in 2004. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

In 2004, the regional president of Friuli, Renzo Tondi, Canadian consul general Peter McGovern, honorary consul Primo Di Luca and mayor Aldo Burelli conferred on me the honorary citizenship of Fagagna. I was deeply honoured to be a citizen of my father’s birthplace. In a beautiful public ceremony, mayor Burelli proclaimed, “For his considerable entrepreneurial merits, for the contribution he gave to honouring his Fagagna and Friuli roots, for his passion and dedication displayed in his work, and for his attachment to his land of origin, I confer on Donald Ziraldo the honorary citizenship of Fagagna.” Needless to say,

I was deeply touched. The only greater personal honour that I received was in 1998, when I was given the Order of Canada medal by Governor General Romeo LeBlanc.

After receiving my honorary citizenship in 2004, I met Count Asquini, later that evening. His family had grown Picolit grapes in Fagagna (the true home of Picolit wine) in the 1700s. It occurred to me that I should replant the famous Picolit of the Castello di Fagagna, as a tribute to my mom and dad. This I did proudly in 2006. These vines produce an excellent wine today. I am extremely proud to be honoured by my peers in the Italian wine industry, with the *Premio Masi* in Verona, and the *Dolegna del Collio, Foglia d’oro*. I am equally honoured (and quite humbled given the august company) to have been selected, by the *National Post*, as one of Canada’s top 25 entrepreneurs of the 20th century, in 1999. What an illustrious group in which to be included!

In my long career as a successful winemaker and businessperson, I am equally proud to have helped to put Canada in a prestigious place as a winemaking nation. Today, there are over 150 wineries in the Niagara region and over 500 in Canada. All of this competition is bound to generate wines of high quality. I am also proud to have founded and chaired (for seven formative years) the *Vintners Quality Alliance* (VQA) to help ensure the premium quality and origin of Canadian wines. I also co-chaired the first *Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI)*, at *Brock University*. This has helped to solidify Niagara as an innovative cool climate wine region. It was also a pleasure to serve as chair of the capital campaign for the *Canadian Food and Wine Institute* at *Niagara College*.

I left *Inniskillin* in 2006, but rest and retirement were just not for me. I had to keep myself busy doing what I always loved to do – work the land. So, I started *Ziraldo Estate Winery*. In 2007, I planted a new vineyard on the site of the original *Inniskillin* property.

I was so passionate about what I was doing that I really did not notice the time flying by. My many years as a bachelor afforded me the luxury of travelling the world to promote Canadian Icewine. In 2012, I married Victoria Gilbert. She is an accomplished film maker and the mother of our young son, Aspen. Victoria's mother is of Polish decent. She grew up in Egypt. Victoria's father, chef Daniel Gilbert, owned and operated *Daniel's of Nobleton* for 32 years. His family hails from Bell Island in Newfoundland. Victoria's ancestor, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, settled Bell Island in 1562.



Figure 7: Aspen, Victoria and Donald enjoying family time, in 2013. Source: Courtesy of K J Bedford and the Ziraldo family.

It is such a joy now to re-experience the wonders of childhood with my son. It is also beautiful to be able to speak to him in Italian as he plays in our vineyards. I look forward to travelling back to Italy every summer to help Aspen discover his Friulan roots and to absorb Italian culture, which is so deeply rooted in history, the arts and winemaking.

I am now happiest when working in my vineyards, with my son by my side. It's a lovely way to pass the time. It's the soil. It's the earth. It's a very grounding experience! I often tell my friends that, in a sense, I am living life backwards. However, this now allows me maximum time to spend with my family. During my busy years building *Inniskillin*, I travelled the world (especially throughout Asia, Europe and the United States) in a relentless quest to make 'Canadian Icewine' an iconic luxury brand.

With my father's ring to ground and guide me, my fate was sealed in a Timmins gold mine a long, long time ago! I am fiercely proud to be Canadian, and equally proud of the cultural aspect of being Italian, and Friulan in particular. For countless centuries, my people have suffered earthquakes, wars, famines,



Figure 8: Growing liquid gold in the Victoria Vineyard, planted in 2007 in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Source: Courtesy of the Ziraldo family.

epidemics, conquests, emperors and exploitation. Yet, with lion hearts, they have always picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and proudly moved on, to better the world and the people around them. This is why I am fiercely proud of my Friulan blood in Canadian skin!