

Bernie Gorski, president of Southwestern Ontario Vintners Association, works to improve the region's wine industry.

By Catherine A. Cocchio

Windsor Business - September 2006

When the idea arose for local vintners to gather a cluster of like-minded partners to promote business earlier this year, it only seemed natural for the industry built on handling grape clusters to go ahead.

The Southwestern Ontario Vintners Association, representing 13 local wineries, supplied initial funds to enlist Douglas Marketing Group to secure industry partners and apply for a \$60,000-grant from the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership Corporation. The result is one of the industry's most successful seasons in decades.

Fertilized by marketing campaigns developed with strategic liaisons, and irrigated by government grants, both Colio and Pelee wineries invested millions in expansion projects, while five new wineries joined the eight already operating on the Essex County Wine Trail.

The resulting "Sense-Sational" campaign became a joint effort of SWOVA, Visitors & Convention Bureau of Windsor, Essex County and Pelee Island, Douglas Marketing Group, Windsor-Essex County Economic Development Commission, Casino Windsor, Tunnel Duty Free Shop, VIA Rail and some local restaurants.

"The wineries are a nice way to package a couple of days stay here. We don't have numbers on how many actually came through the Sense-Sational program, but the response has been positive, especially with day trips. We're investigating repeating in 2007," said Kay Douglas, president of Douglas Marketing Group Inc.

"The Development Commission gave thousands of dollars to support the strategic alliance. We sponsored seminars and planning sessions with Dr. Johan Bruwer from Australia, who recommended the wineries work together and brand the area," said Roman Dzus, acting executive director of the Windsor-Essex County Economic Development Commission.

"The efforts to build a regional brand are making progress. We're seeing more visitors from the United States. I'm assuming it has something to do with the Sense-Sational campaign and the Visitors and Convention Bureau," said Bernie Gorski, president of SWOVA and owner of Colchester Ridge Estate Winery.

In addition to tapping into provincial funds, the last Federal budget provided tax relief money for Canadian winery marketing and equipment updates. "It's meant to put us on more of an even playing field to compete with imports that are continuing to flood our LCBO shelves," said Patricia Negri, vice-president of winery operations with Colio Estate Wines Inc.

"One of the issues vintners have is the ability to sell their product in LCBO and local restaurants. We're looking at some avenues to help," said Robert Tuomi, business development officer with the Windsor-Essex County Economic Development Commission.

"If you ask a construction company where money is being spent in the County, they'll tell you it's the wineries. Pelee just did a significant renovation/expansion, Colio is in the midst of one, and Viewpointe and Sprucewood have major dollars being spent," said Negri.

"The wineries have got it; collective marketing is key. While other tourism amenities are experiencing a decline, the wineries are becoming a trip motivator on their own. They are poised for greatness," said Gordon Orr, managing director of Visitors & Convention Bureau of Windsor, Essex County & Pelee Island.