

In God's half-acre

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In the language of Canada's Ojibway native American tribe, Waupoos means "rabbit". But to modern-day residents of this hamlet in Ontario's Prince Edward County, it is known by a more exalted name: "God's half-acre".

Winding country roads framed by hollyhocks, the spectacular beauty of Lake Ontario and an abundance of prime, south-facing farming acreage are what drew the United Empire loyalists to Waupoos after the American Revolution 200 years ago. Add to that clapboard colonial homes, handsome red-brick Georgian buildings and – perhaps most importantly – a booming wine business in the region, and it's easy to see why the hamlet is gaining even more favour today as a second-home destination.

"It's the world's best chardonnay without a Burgundy postal code," says wine critic Beppi Crosariol of the offering at Closson Chase Vineyards in Hillier, a 45-minute drive from Waupoos. The area's ample limestone terroirs are well-suited to pinot noir, riesling, chardonnay and cabernet franc grapes too and, as a result, the local wine industry has seen more than \$30m in investment over the past 10 years, with vineyard land increasing from 20 acres to 600. All the towns in the county (including its largest city, Picton) have been affected by the wine boom. But none more so than Waupoos.

This modest settlement, with a population of 400, no garbage collection, no sewerage system and only well water, was for many years known only as "Ontario's apple basket", thanks to its orchards. It is one of the area's prettiest patches – almost surrounded by the lake as it dips into Smith's Bay and boasting white sand and crystal-clear water (in contrast to some neighbouring areas, which are burdened with government-protected algae growth, which creates murky and marshy water). But until a few years ago, Waupoos still had a decidedly country-bumpkin image, with farms and a cement plant as its chief employers.

That began to change in 2001, thanks to the opening of The Waupoos Estate Winery and then The County Cider Company, which have drawn wealthy weekenders, as well as homebuyers, from Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and upstate New York in the US.

"Waupoos is the crème de la crème of the county," says estate agent Gail Forcht of Chestnut Park Realty, who is selling a 2,500-sq-ft, seven-bedroom property built in 1750 and set on 3.75 acres of Waupoos Island, which is reached by boat shuttle from the town marina, for C\$699,900. "It used to be that Waupoos was just about apple orchards, pretty farms and gorgeous water but the wineries have really put the area on the map. We have had viewings from rock stars, sports stars, entertainers from Los Angeles, bankers from the UK – you name it. They come to visit and fall in love with the hollyhocks in the summer and the wineries."

Most buyers are looking for secluded spots on the water but there are only so many available, which has caused property values to soar. "I would conservatively estimate that the price of real estate has doubled in the past five years," Forcht says. "I recently sold a four-acre property with 200ft of waterfront for C\$450,000. Almost immediately, the new owner was offered C\$575,000 but he refused. I think that was a smart move."

Londoner Richard Lowry, who recently bought in Waupoos, describes the area as "instantly attractive". "My wife is from that region, so we wanted a second home close to her relatives. A friend took us to Waupoos's cider factory, which was a bit further afield from her family, but we loved Waupoos on the spot. It appeals to us because of its sailing, walking, cycling and fishing and all its [other] outdoor pursuits."

He bought land on a hilltop with a glorious view of the lake and transplanted an old barn from Nova Scotia on to it. "We weren't looking for a house but a position and we found one," he says. "It has a commanding view of the area."

Mica Ertegun, widow of Ahmet Ertegun, the billionaire founder of Atlantic Records, is another fan of Waupoos, having spent eight years in Adolphustown, a 10-minute drive away, after fleeing Romania in the wake of the second world war. "Friends helped us to find a dairy farm and the first time I saw cows, never mind the milking machines, I thought: 'What on earth is this?' [But] we were entirely surrounded by water and it was so beautiful. Everybody was water-skiing in this really blue and warm water. Certainly, the place was a hole-in-the-wall but it was a beautiful hole-in-the wall."

The environment has changed dramatically since then. And, according to local officials, the transformation is not yet complete. The county thinks it could have 2,000 acres of vineyards by 2018, sustaining a C\$84m industry with more than 850 employees.

Some longtime residents worry that Waupoos's quiet charm will be lost as newcomers flood into the market. "While it is great that there has been a property boom, it is not great for those on a fixed income who have seen their municipal taxes rise because of the new assessments," acknowledges local councillor and longtime resident Ray Best. "It's hard to tell a family who have been there for a few generations to sell their land and go live in a condo."

But: "My job is to ensure that we keep our old agricultural ways and that the history and ambience of Waupoos is maintained," he adds. "We have to make sure that the development is in line with our heritage."

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