



# The phoenix

*Not even a tragic fire can slow down Michael Howell. The talented chef is known both at home and by some of the most discerning foodies in the world for his eclectic pairings of Nova Scotian wine and cuisine*

**W**hen Michael Howell glimpsed the flames licking at the windows of his Tempest restaurant ([www.tempest.ca](http://www.tempest.ca)) in Wolfville, N.S., his first horrified thought was for the valuable wines he had stashed in the basement. It was Oct. 23, and, days earlier, he had tucked away 18 bottles of 2003 Blomidon Estates Chardonnay. The wine was going to be featured in a sumptuous dinner he was staging at the prestigious James Beard House in New York on Nov. 9.

Well-known in Nova Scotia for creating The Tempest's eclectic world cuisine, Howell was flattered to be invited to cook for a select audience at the James Beard House, a national non-profit organization based in New York City that showcases culinary artists from all over the world. In the food industry, being invited to host a dinner at the James Beard House is akin to winning an Academy Award. Howell knew the dinner would allow him to impress some very discerning diners and to feature the Nova Scotian seafood, meats, organic vegetables, and wines he loves to feature in his restaurant.

Tempest is one of the most highly regarded restaurants in the small university town. Long a haven for foodies, Wolfville benefits from its proximity to

the fresh produce and fine wines produced in the surrounding Annapolis Valley, as well as the fresh seafood from nearby Hall's Harbour. Howell had declared himself "proud to be serving only Nova Scotian wines in New York," but, as he stood on the sidewalk in the early hours of that autumn morning, he feared for both his livelihood and his New York dinner.

"I got a call at about 4:30 a.m. from a former employee who was walking by and noticed the fire," Howell recalls. "When I got there smoke was pouring from every crevice, and flames were billowing up from the basement. I was in shock. I couldn't take in the ramifications of what it would do to my restaurant and the 24 employees who were relying on my business over the Christmas season."

The fire, which started in a basement dryer, destroyed \$16,000 of wine. Incredibly, the Blomidon Estates Chardonnay was saved by the water used to douse the flames. "The labels were smoked but the wine was OK," says Howell. "The winery relabelled them, and we took them to New York." The fire was dramatic on its own, but dealing with U.S. red tape was another headache. Getting Nova Scotian food and wine across the border turned out to be "an amazingly



complex logistical operation," says Howell.

To avoid legislation surrounding imported beef and mad cow disease, Howell used Nova Scotian pork instead. "Fall in Nova Scotia" was the theme of the six-course menu. "I used ingredients such as root vegetables to create gustatory eating with flavours people appreciate," he says. "It was all about comfort food. The menu was representative of Nova Scotian cuisine through the ages but with a modern interpretation. For example, one



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of our desserts was blueberry grunt, made of Nova Scotian blueberries and dumplings. The grunt was served in espresso cups to create a modern interpretation of a classic dish.” The Beard dinner was a huge success, and Howell received the honour of being invited back.

### Playing to strengths

Local wine writer Sean Wood, the author of *Wineries and Wine Country of Nova Scotia*, says that Howell is contributing to

the growth of Nova Scotia’s rapidly evolving but still fledgling wine industry. “Michael forges relationships with local wineries and features Nova Scotian wine,” he says. “He trains his staff to understand Nova Scotian wine through tastings so they can suggest the wines to customers. He has set benchmarks for local cuisine and has embraced the fact that local wine and food go together.”

Howell’s New York menu played on traditional regional strengths; for instance,

he paired seafood with *Domaine de Grand Pré L’Acadie Blanc Reserve 2004*, a wine made from a winter-hardy North American grape particularly well-suited to seafood. Howell also incorporated some individualistic touches; his pairing of *Jost Eagle Tree Muscat 2004* with *Valley Pumpkin Gnocchi*, *Dragon’s Breath Blue Sauce*, *Martock Glen Wild Boar*, and *Venison Sausage* intrigued Wood. “It’s an exotic dish and a dramatic combination,” he says. “The Eagle Tree is aromatic; it has a certain spiciness, a pepperiness, and good acidity.”

Although Nova Scotia’s cool climate is not ideal for making red wines, Howell cleverly showcased *Domaine de Grand Pré’s* rich and complex *Marechal Foch Reserve 2000* with *Mountain Maple Syrup Glazed Roasted Rack of Nova Scotia Heritage Pork*. Desserts were served with *2004 Benjamin Bridge Vineyards Vidal Icewine*. A product of Nova Scotia’s cold winters, icewine is the result of winter harvesting in which grapes are subjected to several days with temperatures at  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  or below. The cold creates sugar and flavour levels two to three times more intense than fall-harvested grapes.

Now Howell is overseeing the renovation of his restaurant, which he hopes to have reopened by May. The interior of the mid-1800s building is being redesigned and may feature a takeout section, aimed mainly at Acadia University’s 3,000-plus students. New York remains a positive memory; in addition to the accolades Howell received from being there, the two young chefs he took with him, Ryan Bannerman and Ryan Decker, gained stature and skill. “What you take away is the satisfaction of playing with the big boys,” he says, “and cooking on the same level as other chefs from around the world.” — CAROL MOREIRA