

# 2015 VINTAGE REPORT

White Wine Quality: Very Good to Excellent

Red Wine Quality: Very Good to Excellent

Icewine: Excellent

*A very hot, dry summer brought an early harvest across the province and, despite the challenges that the extreme heat brought, the 2015 vintage has resulted in exceptional wines in all of British Columbia's wine regions.*

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## Okanagan Valley

During the winter of 2014/2015, the Okanagan experienced several extended periods of freezing temperatures. Because of this, there was some minimal bud damage reported in a few isolated frost pockets.

The spring saw warmer than normal temperatures. In May, the total monthly Growing Degree Days (GDD) were the highest ever recorded with 185.6 reported in Summerland and 223.5 in Osoyoos. The warm temperatures, combined with low precipitation, were the catalysts for early bud break and flowering.

Severine Pinte, Winemaker and Viticulturist at Le Vieux Pin Winery (Oliver) and LaStella Winery (Osoyoos) reported bud break on March 30 and flowering on June 2 in

their southernmost Osoyoos vineyard, with all flowering finished by June 10 in all their Oliver and Osoyoos vineyards.

The overall consensus for summer was that it was hot and dry. June, which often sees moderate temperatures and precipitation, felt like August. From the end of May to mid-September, the cumulative GDD statistics show that 2015 was significantly warmer than any other years, even surpassing 1998 which was the warmest growing season on record.

Because of the high heat, veraison also came early, but the extreme temperatures also created particular challenges as vines effectively shut down once temperatures go beyond 35° Celcius (95°F). In August, vintners were faced with another challenge from Mother Nature: forest fires. Although fires burned frighteningly

close to several wineries in Oliver, the bigger challenge for most in the Okanagan was the thick smoke that filled the Valley from the fires near Lake Chelan in Washington. There was a hidden benefit to the fires, in that it actually lowered the GDD in August, slowing ripening.

In September, the warm temperatures continued with little precipitation which meant that the disease pressure was very low, resulting in cleaner fruit which required less sorting.

Overall, harvest dates were early with most wineries starting two to three weeks ahead of normal. The first grapes for table wine were picked by Jackson-Triggs Okanagan Estate on August 20, which was their earliest harvest on record.

"Every year we say we couldn't ask for a better growing season, and every

year it seems to be getting better and better!" noted Troy Osborne, Director of Viticulture at Jackson-Triggs Okanagan Estate. "Every winery has a picking strategy depending on what style of wine they are looking for. We pick our Sauvignon Blanc grapes early to achieve those green, veracious notes and fresh, crisp flavour profiles" explained Osborne. "The biggest challenge is dealing with increased growing degree days and matching our crop loads to balance that."

David Patterson, Winemaker at Tantalus Vineyards in Kelowna noted that "Pinot Noir from the North Okanagan is exceptional this year, delicate and fragrant," and Mason Spink, Winemaker at Dirty Laundry Vineyards in Summerland remarked that the surprises for them were Riesling and Syrah.

Despite the challenges brought forward by the higher-than-normal temperatures, the 2015 vintage quality was excellent overall. Some of the standout varietals from the Okanagan were Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

### **Fraser Valley**

Like their colleagues in the Okanagan, vintners in the Fraser Valley reported an early harvest due to unseasonably warm temperatures and lower-than-average precipitation.

Patrick Murphy, Owner/Winemaker at Vista D'oro Farms & Winery in Langley noted that 2015 was the earliest harvest they've ever had, starting on August 28 with their estate Maréchal Foch, which Murphy explained they tend to pick early to create their lighter style red. "The wet clay we have here in the Fraser Valley creates a much different tasting Foch to the grapes grown in the dryer, sandy soils of the Okanagan. This year's crop looks fantastic" remarked Murphy who had already started picking their Petit Milo and Siegerrebe grapes.

### **Similkameen Valley**

In the Similkameen Valley, Rhys Pender MW, Owner of Little Farm Winery in Cawston reported that the warm spring temperatures saw bud break 20 days early in his Chardonnay. He started harvest on August 19th with Chardonnay and was done on September 3rd with Riesling, finishing a full three days earlier than they had even started in 2014 – and 2014 was considered to be a hot vintage.

Also in Cawston, Orofino Winery picked their first grapes on August 24 including Muscat, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris and on August 28 their Gamay Noir and Pinot Noir were picked and crushed. "We've had the same length in growing season but with such a hot and dry June everything got off to an early start,"

noted Owner/Winemaker John Weber. "We're tasting delicious grapes, I'm thrilled."

### **Vancouver Island & The Gulf Islands**

On Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, growers also experienced warm and dry temperatures. Statistics provided by Lamont Brooks of the Wine Islands Growers Association showed that precipitation levels in the Cowichan Valley were far below normal from April to June, only receiving a total of 42 mm during that period (compared to 100 mm in 2014). Lamont also provided the annual GDD statistics, which showed 2015 much higher than any previous vintage with 1322 GDD (cumulative total as of October 31). Prior to 2015, the warmest vintages were 2014 (1261 GDD) and 2006 (1190).

Unsworth Vineyards started harvesting their Pinot Noir grapes for sparkling wine early at 18.5 brix, but their table wines weren't ready for picking until the first week of October. Winemaker Daniel Cosman noted that after a wildly dry summer they didn't experience rain until for two weeks straight it rained so much that harvest was back on par with its typical start dates. "It's been an interesting year on Vancouver Island," explained Cosman, "If I could sum up this year's growing season in one word, it would be monumental." Cosman was particularly excited about

the significant increase in flavour he was tasting in the fruit this year. This was his tenth harvest on Vancouver Island and he said the only year that had come close to being this good in terms of ripeness and yield was 2006.

### **Emerging Regions**

Baillie-Grohman Estate Winery located in Creston, outside of BC's designated viticultural areas, also reported their earliest harvest to date beginning on August 28, nearly a month ahead of 2014. "We usually start harvest in October, so to be picking grapes in August came as a surprise to us!" states Owner Bob Johnson. "I'm not sure if it's because our vines are maturing or if it has just been a great growing season all around, but the fruit flavours are here early and they are really coming along nicely."

### **Icewine Harvest**

After last year's second-earliest start on record (November 12, 2014), the majority of British Columbia's 2015 Icewine harvest happened on December 31 and into the early morning of New Year's Day in the Okanagan. However, the first Icewine grapes for this vintage were picked on November 25, as winemakers and viticulturists in the north Okanagan rejoiced at the early arrival of freezing temperatures.

This was the third consecutive year BC's Icewine harvest started as early as November with just over 100 tons of grapes collected between six wineries located north of Penticton. The remaining 225 tons of grapes were picked from December 26 finishing on January 2 with temperatures well below  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $17.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) and averaging around  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $14^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) throughout the Okanagan Valley.

Summerhill Pyramid Winery in Kelowna started picking for Icewine on November 25, bringing in approximately 30 tons of frozen grapes. "The conditions were excellent, we would have kept picking if we had the capacity, so we were very fortunate to have the second freezing come in January," says Eric von Krosigk, Winemaker for Summerhill Pyramid Winery. They resumed picking early New Year collecting another 20 tons of the remaining crop. "The second time around temperatures dropped to  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $8.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) across the entire Valley. It was absolutely delightful being able to pick during the day," noted von Krosigk. Summerhill Pyramid Winery lost about 50% of their crop to wind, weather and animal pressure, but von Krosigk described the quality and ripeness of the fruit to be unlike any other vintage he'd seen in the Okanagan and predicted this year's harvest would be "the vintage of the century."

Nk'Mip Cellars in Osoyoos began picking their Icewine at 2:00 AM on New Year's Day with temperatures at  $-14^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $7^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) when the inner cluster berries were still frozen. The team brought in over eight tons of Riesling and finished pressing at 40.5 brix. Assistant Winemaker at Nk'Mip Cellars, Justin Hall noted, "Last year we were picking in early November so we did see a smaller crop this year, but the overall quality of the juice is still really good and I'm looking forward to this vintage."

The BC Wine Authority noted that 16 of the 20 registered wineries picked this year, collecting approximately 376 tons of grapes throughout the Okanagan Valley, one of the lowest Icewine crops in years. Lorrie Zander, BC VQA Coordinator of the BC Wine Authority remarked that "Icewine could very well become 'gold' for 2015 because of the small amount made. This will be a very special year for BC Icewine."

### **Conclusion**

Although the higher-than-normal temperatures brought forward a few unique challenges, the 2015 vintage quality is being touted as excellent. Some of the standout varieties are Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.