

FT Magazine Wine

Canada's wild west: British Columbia wines

How local winemaking endeavours have unearthed some growing locations without parallel elsewhere in the world

Andrew Jefford AUGUST 14 2020

Wine's complications are predicated on four sorts of differences: origin, vintage, grape variety and craft (the skill or otherwise of the winemaker). Origin enjoys the highest status of these, via the notion of terroir: the idea that wines might taste as they do because of the place in which their grapes grow.

Newly planted vineyards rewrite the range of possibilities, sometimes dramatically. In British Columbia, Canada's far west, local winemaking endeavours over the past three decades have unearthed some shockingly unusual growing locations, without parallel elsewhere in the world. "We're still in a giddy phase of experimentation," says Vancouver-based wine buyer and commentator Barbara Philip MW.

One nascent growing location called Lillooet, for example, lies further north than Reims and Epernay in Champagne — yet its warmth (measured as "degree days" — the summation of all the degrees over 10C during the seven-month growing season) exceeds that of Bordeaux in France's south. Philip's fellow Master of Wine Rhys Pender, who now makes wine at Little Farm in the nearby Similkameen Valley, remembers one August day in the southern Okanagan Valley when it was just 7C in the morning — but 46C by the end of the afternoon.

When Séverine Pinte, who had trained in Bordeaux and Languedoc, arrived at Le Vieux Pin winery in the Okanagan Valley, she found that the vineyards experienced similar overall warmth to those regions with which she was familiar — but had a month less to ripen, as the “shoulder seasons” were so brutal. A full year can see 60C of variation, from 40C in summer to -20C in winter. Frosts linger late and return early. The first autumn rains, after a summer too dry for the vines to survive unirrigated, may fall white — as snow.

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One advantage of this high-latitude yet almost desert-like drama is that there are very clear differences of style between the wines of British Columbia and their Canadian siblings over the Rockies in Ontario, where summers are much more humid. There is a quietness, gentleness and restraint about the Ontario style, whereas that of the Okanagan (source of 84 per cent of BC wine) is bright, colourful and dramatic, particularly for the Syrah-based red wines produced in its southern end, adjacent to the US border. It makes most sense, indeed, to see them as wines of the North American west coast: they share the unshackled exuberance of California and Washington state more than

the European-style nuance and inflection that characterises Ontario's seam of inspiration.

The Okanagan is spindly, topographically chaotic — and 170km long. There are considerable differences between the sculpted, shapely wines of its northern sector around Kelowna and Lake Country (Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot) and the richer whites (the widely planted Pinot Gris can be excellent) and vivid, sometimes explosive reds (Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Syrah) of the south. The Similkameen Valley over the hills from the southern Okanagan is differently orientated and a little cooler, as well as having some propitious gravels; Riesling and Pinot Blanc can do well there . . . but so, in the right site, can Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Giddy experimentation remains the order of the day.

A final advantage for both regions is ambitious investors with deep pockets. The Chinese-Canadian Richter Bai's mining fortune funds Phantom Creek, which has managed to entice Olivier Humbrecht MW from Alsace to oversee its whites in the Okanagan (the Pinot Gris is promising) and brought Philippe Melka from Napa to tutor the reds. More unusually, the craze for White Claw Hard Seltzer (and before it Mike's Hard Lemonade) also helps fund terroir research in the Okanagan. Its billionaire creator, Anthony von Mandl, began his working life as a wine importer and now owns Mission Hill (one of the Valley's largest wineries) as well as CedarCreek, CheckMate, Martin's Lane, Road 13 and Liquidity Wines.

That, though, doesn't exhaust BC's surprises. Vancouver Island is also an increasingly sought-after vineyard location — and it would be hard to find a bigger contrast to the Okanagan. In place of a land-locked mountain fastness, you'll find the island moist, oceanic and dreamy. During my pre-lockdown visit in February, a nightlong storm rocked the house I was staying in, while the day that followed saw veils of fine rain dance with sunlight as they might during a Hebridean equinox. It's actually further south than the Okanagan — indeed, the island's capital Victoria is almost as close to Seattle as it is to Vancouver — yet despite that, this is a far cooler growing location, and one with a growing season as extended as the Okanagan's is abrupt.

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Hybrid vines originally accounted for the core of plantings, notably those by independent Swiss breeder Valentin Blattner, but in recent years both Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris have flourished together with smaller plantings of other varieties including Gamay and Auxerrois. The island's sparkling-wine potential is evident and these were the most impressive wines I tasted here, together with some silky yet fresh white blends, sappy Pinot Gris and subtle, fine-toned Pinot Noir.

Alcohols are always low, again in contrast to the wines of the Okanagan, even though picking runs into late October. This long, languid delivery of flavour ripeness with sustained acidity is just what sparkling-wine producers look for.

You might assume that the pulse of global warming favours both of these high-latitude regions, but that isn't necessarily true. Vancouver Island growers don't need to irrigate at present, but drier summers might mean they have to; more warmth, too, would mean their wines begin to lose their distinctive edge and nuance. The situation in the Okanagan, meanwhile, illustrates the complexity of these issues. Summer storms have always caused fires in the mountains. Recent changes (including the devastation wrought by the mountain pine beetle on drought-stressed forests) means that these fires are growing worse. Smoke can hang in the valley for long periods during the summer ripening season, veiling the sunshine and potentially tainting the grapes. And even without the smoke risk, no one in the Okanagan would like much more heat and ripeness, or exuberance could risk toppling into caricature.

A selection of top British Columbia producers (with their best wine styles in brackets)

Okanagan Valley

- Bartier Bros (Chardonnay and Semillon)
- Bella (sparkling)
- Blue Mountain (sparkling)
- CheckMate (Merlot)
- Nichol (Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Syrah)
- Nk'Mip (Merlot)
- Osoyoos Larose (blends)
- Painted Rock (Syrah)
- Phantom Creek (Pinot Gris, Cabernet Sauvignon, blends)
- Poplar Grove (Chardonnay, Viognier)
- Quail's Gate (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc)
- Synchronesh (Riesling)
- Tinhorn Creek (Roussanne)
- Vieux Pin (blends)

Similkameen Valley

- Clos du Soleil (Pinot Blanc, blends)
- Little Farm (Riesling, Chardonnay)

- Orofino (Riesling)
- Vanessa (Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, blends)

Vancouver Island

- Averill Creek (blends, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir)
- Blue Grouse (Ortega, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir)
- Emandare Vineyard (Pinot Noir)
- Rathjen Cellars (Auxerrois, Pinot Gris)
- Unsworth (sparkling, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris)

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