

# PRIVATE VINES

DON'T RETIRE THE BUSINESS NOUS IF THE DREAM IS TO START A WINERY AFTER A CAREER, WRITES LANCE RICHARDSON.



Of all the daydreams that people commonly profess, perhaps the most romantic of all is leaving behind a successful career to buy a private winery, with picturesque views over grape vines and an excellent vintage.

But how do you actually do that? Running a vineyard is far from dreamy: it requires skill, time, money, judgment and good luck. How does a person with a corporate background find success in the difficult – and very different – business of winemaking?

John Skinner, owner of Painted Rock Estate Winery in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, spent more than 25 years as a stockbroker in Vancouver. During that time he was an avid wine collector and spent family holidays visiting wineries in France; he even watched a friend set up a winery from scratch in the Napa Valley. But it wasn't until the year 2000 that he decided to try it for himself.

"When you're in the brokerage business, the investment banking business, you've got decent market timing," he says.

The Okanagan was only just emerging as a serious winemaking region. Skinner saw an opportunity. He applied the "tried and true methodology" of risk assessment, appraising properties until he found the perfect one. Then, after a year of study as his

team removed the stumps of an old orchard that had stood on the site, he set out to push Painted Rock to its full potential.

Skinner cites two factors behind his rapid success: "First, I didn't come from the industry. I didn't know how to cut corners." This meant he approached everything with meticulous precision, avoiding the kind of bad habits that were holding other wineries in the Okanagan back.

"Second, I also had experience in the investment banking business of hiring highly qualified people and trusting them," he says. That included Alain Sutre, a top consultant from Bordeaux, who filled in the gaps of Skinner's knowledge of everything from the ideal picking date to the best French oak barrels for fermentation.

"I've slept every night because I completely trust my team," Skinner says, pointing out that his very first vintage won two British Columbia Lieutenant Governor's Awards.

Indeed, his strategic, rationalised approach to winemaking – essentially, managing it in the same way he used to treat his investments – has delivered dependable results. The careers aren't so different after all, Skinner says.

Similar sentiments are echoed by Phil and Viv Snowden, who established Singlefile Wines in Denmark, Western Australia, in 2007.

For 19 years prior to that, the couple had run a successful multinational resource services company called Snowden Consulting. Trained geologists originally from Zimbabwe – they moved to Australia in 1986 – they spent their entire careers working in and around the mining sector. Then they sold the company and started casting around for something new.

"Until we exited the business, we didn't know what we wanted to do," Viv recalls.

"We didn't want to retire," Phil adds.

They soon bought the estate in Denmark and decided winemaking could utilise their skills in a more rewarding way. It was an opportunity to build something tangible

and lasting for their multi-generational family: a living heirloom.

They only knew a little about wine, but enough to understand there were no guarantees, and it was better to finance a vineyard slowly, independently, rather than through loans from a bank.

Like Skinner, the Snowdens began by carefully researching their new field. They also acknowledged their own limitations, surrounding themselves with experts. That included winemaker Larry Cherubino and their son-in-law, Patrick Corbett, who had a flair for marketing – crucial when a large part of the wine trade is simply getting the product in front of consumers. ("I would tell anybody who wants to get into this field to get a son-in-law to do the hard yards," Phil advises.)

Ten years old, Singlefile, while still small, now regularly wins awards and offers eight wines that scored 95 or above in the *2017 Halliday Wine Companion*.

"Our friends who come here are split: 50 per cent feel sorry for us and think we should retire, and the other 50 per cent think they'd love to be doing this," Phil says.

"But I don't feel like it's work," adds Viv, who often plays host at the cellar door. "It's socialising. I like to be hospitable. And I don't spend all my time writing reports any more." ❌



TOP: John Skinner's Painted Rock Vineyard in Okanagan, British Columbia. ABOVE: The Snowdens' Singlefile vineyard in Denmark, Western Australia.