

PREMIUM

Okanagan: Canada's global wine region

International wine experts are bringing their skills and knowledge to Canada's westernmost province of British Columbia, joining with local talent young and old, to make the Okanagan Valley one of the most exciting wine regions of the New World.



Daniel Honan

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View of Skaha Lake and McIntyre Bluff from Okanagan Falls in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada Credit: laughingmango / Getty

📌 Exclusive Highlights

Situated at the edge of the winegrowing world, on the 49th parallel north, the Okanagan Valley is a stunning landscape of ancient glacial lakes, ice dams and calderas enveloped by steep mountain ranges, sloped benches and hillsides comprised of silty, sandy, gravelly and stony soils.

Here in this marginal, cool to cold continental climate, vineyards are becoming recognised for their ability to produce world-class wines of outstanding quality, elegance and finesse.

'Where we have a long history of wine on our shoulders in Europe, the Okanagan is more like a blank sheet of paper, where we can write a new history in a new land,' says Sutra. 'It is a fantastic experience to be a part of something from the very beginning.'

Untapped potential

Sutra has been coming to the Okanagan to try and understand the valley's potential for winegrowing since 1999.

'I was aware of the Canadian wine industry in Québec, he says. 'I knew about ice wine but not much more than that.

'When I first came to the Okanagan in 1999, it was to develop a new wine project, Osoyoos Larose. I stayed in the valley for a week or so and tasted some wines. I remember thinking, "well, the wines aren't fantastic, but they might have the potential to be great someday".'

Sutra now consults to a number of high-profile wineries within the Okanagan Valley, including Burrowing Owl, Culmina, Poplar Grove and Painted Rock.

'I've been working with Alain for almost 14 years now,' says John Skinner, owner of Painted Rock.

'On a tip off from a nursery owner in Bordeaux, who I was buying some very specific varietal clones from, Alain took it upon himself to visit us here in the Okanagan. We took a walk through our vineyard, and afterwards he said he could help us improve our wines, which he absolutely has.'

Skinner, a former investment banker, says he wants to be 'better, not bigger'. So to raise Painted Rock's capacity for quality and fulfil his ambitious winegrowing endeavours, Skinner knew he had to hire experts like Sutra.

'There's no doubt we have some good home-grown talent here in BC, but we're still a young industry,' says Skinner. 'We don't yet have the facility within our region to educate and grow that community of experts we need. So, a lot of us have had to reach out for international guidance.'

Travelling winemakers

There are many stories of emerging wine regions importing human and intellectual capital from more established areas with greater experience in grape growing and wine making.

In the latter half of the 1800s in Australia's Hunter Valley, bounty immigrants from Germany were brought over to labour in the vineyards. A century later, Australia's first flying winemakers brought their own expertise to many northern hemisphere wine regions.

Today the Okanagan Valley is benefiting from the knowledge and experience of viticultural and winemaking consultants from across the winemaking world, including Bordeaux's Michel Rolland at Mission Hill Winery, and both Tuscany's Alberto Antonini and Chile's Pedro Parra at Okanagan Crush Pad.

‘When I first came to the Okanagan, I was struck by its beauty and the energy of the people and their pioneering spirit,’ says Olivier Humbrecht MW of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace, who works with one of the region’s newest wineries, Phantom Creek Estate.

‘When I started to taste the region’s wines, I knew there was potential for greatness here.’

Humbrecht has been hired to help develop Phantom Creek’s vineyards and transition them over to an organic and biodynamic farming regime, working closely with Napa Valley viti/vini power couple Anne and Cameron Vawter and New Zealand winemaker Francis Hutt.

‘Whenever you bring people like me or Francis over from another wine region, the danger is in trying not to replicate the place you are from in the new place,’ explains Humbrecht.

‘The last thing I want Phantom Creek to do is copy other regions’ wines – to try and make a red Bordeaux or a Burgundian Pinot, or even try to make wine to a New Zealand style.

‘My job is to help them find out what the signature of the Okanagan is, so they can start making great Okanagan wine, using grapes from the Okanagan and winemaking methods from the Okanagan, which are developed and proven over time.’

He adds: ‘Replication might be inevitable at the beginning – and we are at the beginning – but it should never be the ultimate goal.’

Australasian influence

Having recently arrived from Carrick Wines in Central Otago, Hutt is eager to push the progression of the Okanagan Valley as an emerging, potentially world-class wine region.

‘It’s not really my style to come in and blaze away,’ says Hutt. ‘My role, first and foremost, is to make the best wines possible. And the way to do that is to collaborate with Olivier and everyone here in the Okanagan community.’

‘We need to combine our experiences and learn from each other and the environment. That’s how we make the best wines possible: together.’

Another expat forging a new winemaking life in the Okanagan is Australia-via-California winemaker Phil McGhan of Checkmate Winery, which specialises in premium examples of Chardonnay and Merlot.

‘One of the things that drew me [to the Okanagan] was that there were vineyards that were already quite established,’ says McGhan, ex winemaker of Williams Selyem in California’s Russian River Valley.

‘At Checkmate, we have access to 20-year-old Merlot vines and 45-year-old Chardonnay vines, which are as old as anything I’ve ever worked with.’

‘These vines are hitting that phase where they’re starting to produce really interesting, complex wines which will help shape and identify the Okanagan Valley as a place of unique wine.’

Local knowledge

At the southern end of the valley in the desert town of Osoyoos, right on the border with the USA, Carol and Dan Scott of Lariana Cellars have been growing grapes on a former summer campground – Shady Lagoon – for the past decade and crafting wines which, while popular with locals, remain mostly unknown outside of BC, let alone Canada.

‘There’s no doubt that experts from outside North America coming to the Okanagan – consulting, moving here and even starting their own wineries – has resulted in more international exposure for the valley and really elevated the overall quality of the wines being produced here over the past 10 years,’ says Carol.

‘But we mustn’t forget there are many local pioneers who’ve contributed greatly to the establishment of the Okanagan Valley today as a winegrowing region.’

She cites Senka Tennant and Richard Cleave, who work for her, as two key names.

Croatian-born Tennant moved to Canada aged 13 and has worked in the Okanagan for more than 20 years. She was winemaker and founder of Terravista Vineyards in Naramata as well as Black Hills winery in Oliver, among others. Viticultural consultant Richard Cleave is a 40-year veteran of Okanagan grape growing who has helped establish Burrowing Owl Estate and Phantom Creek in the mid 1990s, as well as Lariana Cellars in 2007.

Both have worked with Howard Soon, awarded the Order of Canada in 2019 for services to the BC wine industry. With 38 vintages under his belt at, among others, Calona/Andrew Peller, Sandhill, Red Rooster, Tinhorn Creek and now Vanessa Vineyards in the Similkameen Valley, he is Canada’s longest-serving winemaker.

Others include Robert Goltz and Harry McWatters who, until their deaths in 2019, were regularly sought out for their wealth of expertise with regards to soils, climate and knowledge the right terroirs for specific varieties.

BC’s door is open

Languedoc-born Severine Pinte, winemaker for Le Vieux Pin and La Stella wineries has seen just how much the valley has evolved in 25 years – from the early, enthusiastic rush to plant vines just about anywhere, to now thinking more deeply about site and varietal selection.

‘When I arrived in 1996, the idea of terroir was not really thought about. A few wineries were dedicated to finding balance from their vines, but many were content with just making wine – maybe adding a little bit of this or a little bit of that to fix up mistakes later,’ says Pinte.

‘There’s a shift now to identifying the best places to grow the best grapes, and a lot more focus on how to manage a vineyard according to what the terroir is trying to say.’

Pinte is quick to emphasise how positive this evolution has been by echoing Alain Sutre’s sentiments regarding Europe’s long history with winegrowing – forging a new path instead of following a well-trodden one.

‘I’ve accomplished way more in 10 years in the Okanagan than I could have ever done in 10 years in France,’ she says.

‘We’re a very young wine region compared to the rest of the world, and the door is still wide open to new ideas and passionate people.’

Daniel Honan’s pick from ‘global’ Okanagan

Checkmate, Queen's Advantage Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2015



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Old-vine intensity on the nose – planted in 1973 at the home vineyard on Golden Mile Bench, these are BC's oldest Chardonnay vines – along with scented tropical notes of passion fruit and pineapple plus lemon curd. Bright, lemony citrus acidity braces against the sweet fruit flavou...

Points 92



Painted Rock, Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2018

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Charming, elegant, bracing and bright, using fruit from the coolest part of Painted Rock's vineyards by Skaha Lake (French viticulturalist Alain Sutre has consulted here since 2006). Firm, cool-climate white peach and pear fruit, lemon curd, sweet almond blossom florals and...

Points 91

Phantom Creek, Cuvée, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2016

Phantom Creek is owned by Chinese businessman Richter Bai and now has Olivier Humbrecht MW on board (since 2018) as winemaking consultant. A powerful yet pretty Cabernet-dominant (38%) Bordeaux blend, with a spectrum of ripe black and blue brambleberry fruit underpinned by bracing acidity. Sappy and subtle, with a satin...

Points 94



Painted Rock, Red Icon, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2017

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Bordeaux winegrowing consultant Alain Sutre has worked with Painted Rock's John Skinner since 2006. This wine (a 38% Merlot-dominant Bordeaux blend with 2% Syrah) is a thrilling mix of herbal black and blue berries, cherries and currants crushed under oak along with earthy t...

Points 93



Phantom Creek, Syrah, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2016

A stunning cool-climate Syrah from a 0.5ha site (just four barrels were made), emitting heady scents of black plum, blue and boysenberry fruits, black olive, crushed violet and stony graphite. Supple yet focused. Napa viti/vini couple Anne and Cameron Vawter and New Zealand winemaker Francis Hutt work closely with consultant...

Points 93



Mission Hill Winery, Legacy Series Compendium, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2013

Bordeaux wine consultant Michel Rolland has worked with Mission Hill since 2005, and from 2018 Australian Ben Bryant (formerly of Jacob's Creek) has joined as chief winemaker. Sinewy Cabernet Sauvignon (44%) dominates this Bordeaux blend from estate vineyards in Osooyos...

Points 91



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