

Digging the dirt in British Columbia

The 250km stretch of western Canada's key wine valleys of Okanagan and Similkameen offer winemakers enviable options in the myriad soil and grape types. Tina Gellie reports



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Canada's ruggedly beautiful westernmost province of British Columbia (BC) has it in spades, whether you're navigating Vancouver's property bubble or the black runs of Whistler Blackcomb.

It's also a vital consideration for grape growers and winemakers in the 250km-long stretch of the Okanagan Valley, from Vernon in the north to Osoyoos on the US border in the south, as well as the Similkameen Valley to the west of its southern tip.

Steep and undulating hillsides rise from both east and west banks of the adjoining Lakes Okanagan, Skaha and Vaseux, creating pockets of microclimates, plus myriad soil types – from sand and volcanic matter to ancient glacial till. Over 250km, the climate naturally varies: cooler and higher in elevation around Kelowna, Naramata, Summerland and Okanagan Falls; to hotter and drier at Oliver, Golden Mile Bench and Osoyoos.

While Okanagan opened its first winery in 1931, it took until 1984 for Similkameen. Here, vines are planted in arid, windy, desert-like conditions, surrounded by imposing mountains. It's thanks to these factors that deter pests and diseases, that Similkameen is recognised as Canada's organic farming capital, with 42% of all crops grown this way and an increasing move to biodynamics.

Being this far north (between the 49th and 50th parallel; the same as Champagne and Rheingau), vines in Similkameen and

Okanagan benefit from more sunlight hours than California – about 14 hours a day in summer – and big diurnal temperature differences, helping grape aromatics. Annual rainfall is also low, averaging 300mm.

This diversity of soils, climates, aspects and elevations means more than 60 grape varieties are grown in Okanagan (3,500ha) and Similkameen (350ha), both a boon and a curse to the 192 licensed wineries.

'When I arrived here,' says Mathieu Mercier the French-born winemaker at Osoyoos Larose, 'I couldn't understand why there were so many varieties – Riesling next to Syrah. It's exciting for consumers to have so much choice, but for us to improve we have to take a step back and look more closely at the soils.'

Dave Paterson, winemaker at Tantalus in Kelowna agrees. 'We're a young industry so it's going to take time, but there are about 50 producers truly focusing on viticulture more than barrels and additives, and that's thanks to being more worldly: travelling more, doing vintages abroad, going to symposiums – not just trying to make money.'

Site specifics

Okanagan Crush Pad in Summerland, which makes its own Haywire brand as well as wine for other vintners, sought advice from terroir expert Pedro Parra. On Switchback, its 4ha organic vineyard planted to Pinot Gris, Parra dug more than 30 pits to look at subsoils; now



Clockwise from above: spectacular views of Lake Okanagan from Quail's Gate; from left, Matt Dumayne, Christine Coletta and Steve Lornie of Okanagan Crush Pad; Ian MacDonald of Liquidity Wines; Clos du Soleil in BC's organic capital of Similkameen; Tinhorn Creek's Gewürztraminer

several Switchback plots are vinified separately because of their different characters.

Down the road is OCP's new Garnet Hill Ranch, a 130ha block that had never been farmed, boasting Canada's highest-elevation vineyard at 680m. Following Parra's electro-conductivity survey and more than 100 pits, 10ha of Pinot Noir was planted in 2012, with 5ha of Chardonnay and Riesling going in the ground this spring. The site was certified organic in 2016 and is farmed biodynamically.

Bordeaux consultant Alain Sutre has worked with several Okanagan wineries, believing the region's wines will soon be as identifiable as those from Napa, Bordeaux or Burgundy. Like Parra, he digs pits to identify soil types and then replants the right variety and rootstock to the right soil, advocating sustainable and organic farming, as well as micro-irrigating and -harvesting in plots averaging just 0.4ha.

At Culmina in Oliver, owned by Don and Elaine Triggs, pioneers of Canada's wine industry through their former venture Jackson-Triggs, Sutre's work across their 22ha of vineyards planted on three benches has been eye-opening. Understanding the >



300m difference in elevations, aspects and myriad soil types from chalky limestone to black coppery earth is the reason they can plant everything in this part of the valley, from the classic red Bordeaux grapes to Viognier, Riesling and even Grüner Veltliner.

If we're talking benches, the most famous in BC is Golden Mile Bench, the province's first sub-region, granted in 2015. For six years Sandra Oldfield, CEO and president of Tinhorn Creek, fought for this terroir to be recognised and, on 1 May, her winery will release its first bottling with the new designation – the Golden Mile Bench, Oldfield Series Chardonnay.

The bench is on the western side of the Okanagan Valley, south of Oliver and opposite Black Sage Bench. 'The soil is unique,' says winemaker Andrew Windsor. 'It's rocky as it comes from the mountain ridge behind the bench, not from glacial deposits like most of the valley. It also benefits from afternoon sun, making it cooler than the valley's eastern side.'

With the BC government's announcement in December 2016 supporting the move towards sub-regional labelling, it is likely many more proposals to recognise such terroirs will be put forward this year. Quail's Gate in Kelowna, one of the early BC wineries, established in 1956, is one of them. It will be campaigning for the Boucherie Bench – the volcanic soils home to the estate's premium blocks of mineral Burgundian-style Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Ian MacDonald, owner and president of Liquidity Wines, a 15ha boutique estate in the Okanagan Falls, was one of the 15 members of the BC Wine Appellation Task Group pushing for sub-regional recognition, among other changes. His winery is not a member of the BC VQA (an appellation of origin system, like the AP and DOC systems in France and Italy) for wines made from 100% BC-grown grapes, but he is nevertheless very keen on site-specific labelling. 'In my opinion VQA is just a standard,

not a quality assessment,' he explains. 'I'd rather tell customers about how distinctive the Okanagan Falls sub-appellation is rather than just that my grapes come from BC.'

Hester Creek winemaker Rob Summers agrees: 'Our uniqueness is our diversity – that's what we should be pushing. The fact our Merlot from Black Sage Bench is different to Painted Rock's Merlot from the Skaha Hills shows we have distinct terroirs.'

Similkameen secrets

The 18 licensed wineries in the organic haven of the Similkameen Valley think of themselves as 'the Sonoma to Okanagan's Napa', says John Weber of Orofino, who moved here from Saskatchewan in 2001 after missing the turn-off to Oliver. 'It takes an effort to come here, making the extra 30-minute drive from Osoyoos or Penticton. But it's worth it!'

Orofino, which built Canada's first strawbale winery, works with Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Muscat and Riesling, as well as Syrah, Bordeaux grapes, Pinot Noir and Gamay, supplementing estate fruit with more from contract growers who farm the region's key limestone vineyards such as Passion Pit, Hendsbee and Blind Creek on the Cawston Bench and the harsh, rocky Scout Vineyard in South Cawston. 'The wines taste different down here,' Weber says. 'They are more vintage-driven than Okanagan.'

Rhys Pender MW of Little Farm agrees: 'There is a bigger difference between vintages than there often is between varieties. Our Chardonnay and Riesling in 2013, for example, have very similar aromas of rocks, flint and minerals and the same high acidity.'

Mike Clark at Clos du Soleil, a specialist in Bordeaux-style wines, explains that with no moderating influence of the lakes, frost is the biggest risk factor to Similkameen grapes. The extreme desert-like conditions mean evaporation is also an issue – Pender estimates

Above: Tantalus in Kelowna has some of British Columbia's oldest plantings of Riesling, from which it makes one of Canada's best whites

To celebrate 150 years of dominion, Canada is the feature country of the Vancouver International Wine Festival, from 11-19 February. More than 180 wineries from 18 countries will attend, including 76 wineries from BC and eastern Canada. www.vanwinefest.ca

Gellie's 10 picks from Okanagan and Similkameen



Tantalus, Old Vine Riesling, Okanagan Valley 2013 93

£35 **Tour de Force**
From 1978-planted vines farmed sustainably. Taut and concentrated kombucha tea, citrus and wet stones on a dry, textural palate. Zippy acidity and a long, saline finish. Vital, rich and fresh; one of Canada's best whites.

'I want you to taste life in my wines in 20 years' time,' says winemaker Dave Paterson. **Drink 2017-2030 Alc 12.1%**



Haywire (Okanagan Crush Pad), Free Form White, Okanagan Valley 2014 92

£35 **Red Squirrel**
So many top wines from Matt Dumayne (and consultant Alberto Antonini), but this 100% Sauvignon Blanc is very exciting, made naturally in stainless steel with five months' skin contact. Drink at room temperature to let the sweet hay, mango and guava shine on the textural, rich palate. Also try the Free Form and Canyonview Pinot Noirs and Switchback Wild Ferment Pinot Gris in amphora.

Drink 2017-2018 Alc 13.5%



Little Farm, Mulberry Tree Vineyard Riesling, Similkameen Valley 2014 92

N/A UK www.littlefarmwinery.ca
Just 115 cases made, with minimal intervention, by Rhys Pender MW and wife Alishan. The 2015 vintage is probably sold out too. Dry, limey and pure, with the valley's distinctive racy acidity and flinty wet-stone minerality. Also look out for the lean, precise Chardonnay.

Drink 2017-2023 Alc 13.5%

Quail's Gate, Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley 2014 91

POA **Fairview**
This popular Kelowna winery focuses on Burgundian varieties. A big-volume wine (8,000 cases), it is very well made, showing integrated oak, fresh green apple and mandarin fruit as well as spicy toast notes. Easy-drinking and elegant.

Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13%

Culmina, Unicus Grüner Veltliner, Okanagan Valley 2014 90

N/A UK www.culmina.ca
From the Wachau-like schistous soils of Margaret's Bench at 600m comes this new line for Culmina, from 1ha of seven-year-old vines. Pink grapefruit, green apple and white pepper notes, on a juicy, grippy palate. Try the Decora Riesling and Hypothesis Bordeaux red blend too.

Drink 2017-2018 Alc 14%



Orofino, Wild Ferment Syrah, Similkameen Valley 2014 93

N/A UK www.orofinovineyards.com
This and the 2015 have sold out (100 cases of each), but snap up the 2016 later this year. 100% Syrah from the Scout Vineyard, aged in concrete for five months, then bottled unfiltered. So pure and vibrant, showing real sense of place – juicy, mineral, meaty raspberries and violets. Also try the Scout Vineyard Syrah and Hendsbee Vineyard Rieslings.

Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14.4%

Meyer Family, McLean Creek Rd Pinot Noir, Okanagan Valley 2012 92

£34 **Ministry of Drinks**
Made by Chris Carson, this and the 2013 vintage are no strangers to *Decanter* praise. Dusty tannins and tart cherry

and cranberry fruit, spice from the integrated French oak and kept fresh from 15% whole bunches. Also seek out the McLean Creek Rd Chardonnay and micro-cuvées. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**



Le Vieux Pin, Cuvée Violette, Okanagan Valley 2014 92

£30-£39 **Tour de Force, The Good Wine Shop**
Co-fermented with 1% Roussanne, this ripe, spicy, red-fruited Syrah is lifted and elegant in a Côte-Rôtie style. Classic violets, black pepper, boysenberry and meaty pan juices on a silky, supple palate, with evident but integrated French oak. Delicious!

Drink 2017-2021 Alc 14.2%

Clos du Soleil, Signature, Similkameen Valley 2013 91

POA **Beviqua, Fairview**
51% Merlot, 34% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Cabernet Franc and 2% each Malbec and Petit Verdot, aged 17 months in 100% French oak. Restrained and youthful, with bramble fruit density, firm tannins and tobacco spice. Also try the Cabernet Sauvignon-driven, more approachable Estate Red.

Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13.8%

Painted Rock, Cabernet Franc, Okanagan Valley 2013 90

£30-£38.75 **21 Wines, Butlers Wine, Ministry of Drinks, Museum Wines, Wine Treasury**
A delicious, bristling example of Cabernet Franc – the inaugural release – showing lively acidity allied to a dense, complex palate of mulberries, pomegranate, lead pencil and bay leaf. The tannins are inky and grippy, from 18 months in French oak (30% new). Try the flagship Red Icon 2013 too.

Drink 2017-2021 Alc 14.8%

For full details of UK stockists, see p117

he loses about 10% of wine a year: 'It's an expensive angel's share – five cases of wine!'

Back in Oliver, Séverine Pinte of Le Vieux Pin is excited about contributing her share to BC's future: 'I've achieved more in my six years here than in my entire career in France,' she says. While positive about the drive to create more sub-regions, Pinte hopes the industry will

show some patience and tough love. 'It's the wineries and growers, not the government, that need to define BC's unique terroirs,' she explains. 'We can't just start classifying things, we need to take time to learn what is different, and why. Canadians like to be very inclusive and not leave anyone out, but for proper sub-appellations this is necessary.'

Tina Gellie is the associate editor of Decanter