

LAUGHING STOCK VINEYARDS

AS SEEN IN



What makes a *bottling* into a “cult wine?”

by Tim Pawsey

IT'S AN INTERESTING QUESTION. Can a wine's status be proclaimed or must it be won? The unveiling of One Faith Vineyards' inaugural release raised some probing questions, such as: Is it appropriate to use the term “First Growth” outside of Bordeaux (see page 33 of the April 2015 issue)? And can you really make such a claim without any serious track record?

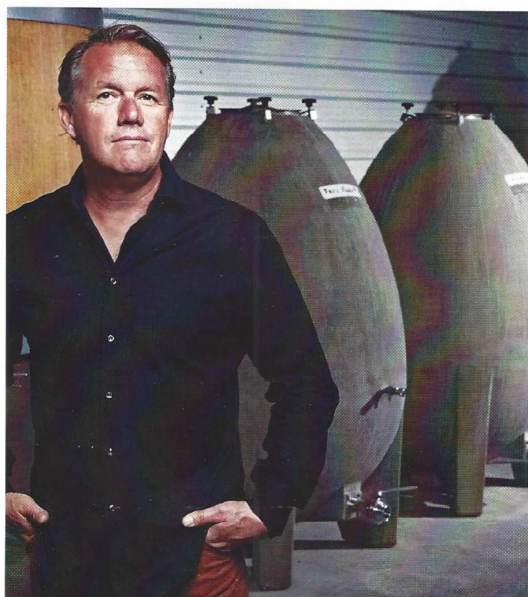
While there's no denying that little expense or expertise was spared in One Faith's production, is it really advantageous to claim the crown as a region's most expensive wine ever introduced?

A little bit of cross-cultural understanding helps here. One Faith is aimed (at least in part) at the Asian buyer, sometimes driven by prestige.

As an example, when Champagne Charles Heidsieck was introduced to Hong Kong (a few decades ago) the importer asked around for the best strategy. The advice was straightforward: “Find the most expensive competitor and add 10 percent.” In a market where only the best will do, especially in matters of “saving face,” success quickly followed.

Is the Okanagan truly ready for a \$165 cachet wine? Only time, and what's in the bottle, will tell.

Sumac Ridge owner Harry McWatters spearheaded the adoption of the Meritage movement in Canada. He also lays claim to having released the Okanagan's most expensive table wine, the aptly named Pinnacle 1997, which held on to that top price spot for many years to come. (It was later discontinued after the winery was purchased by Constellation brands.)



In the meantime, several so-called Bordeaux-inspired Okanagan wines have already achieved their own cachet. They're the kinds of wines that collectors snap up almost as soon as they're released.

In the latter part of the 1990s, McWaters' aspirations were emulated by Mission Hill proprietor Anthony Von Mandl, who was also among the first to implement a program specifically to develop a luxury tier, in Oculus. Von Mandl and winemaker John Simes' initial release (also 1997) blended 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon with 45 percent Merlot and five percent Cab Franc — purchasing grapes from Black Sage Road and Osoyoos.

Over the last decade, the grapes have been virtually all estate sourced; and the quality in better vintages continues to evolve, as does the blend, which now tends to use less Cabernet Sauvignon and more Cabernet Franc. It's tough to find. Rare vertical tastings do occur, but Oculus now sells for over \$100 and past vintages for more. In short, it appears there's no question that Von Mandl and Simes (with an assist from the renowned Michel Rolland) have achieved what they set out to do. While critics once questioned the age-ability of southern Okanagan reds, this wine has helped to set the record straight: Properly handled, some BC wines can fare well in the bottle for several years, towards a couple of decades and possibly longer. Oculus, well beyond its hefty "trophy" styled bottle, has no problem defending its cachet with a track record that's hard to dispute.

Another indisputable icon, Nota Bene was the wine that put Black Hills firmly on the map. Not only that, it singlehandedly ignited a process that propelled the original winery from its humble Quonset hut beginnings to today's elaborate reception centre and one of the valley's most polished visitor experiences. Having Jason Priestley on the team doesn't hurt, either.

Arguably of all the Okanagan iconoclasts — aspiring, real or imagined — no other wine has captured such populist appeal that spans everyone from seasoned collector to enthusiastic amateur.

Much of that appreciation flows from Nota Bene's consistency in style and usually generously ripe character. Even in

lesser years, the wine manages to display a now familiar personality driven by plum and black fruit notes wrapped in anise and sage with a generous mouthfeel.

Another bold project came to fruition, Osoyoos had its beginnings in 1998 when Vincor, then under the leadership of Don Triggs, entered into a partnership with France's Groupe Taillan of Bordeaux. The hope was to plumb the considerable depth of the French experience in order to bring to market an Okanagan wine with discernible Bordeaux style, if not pedigree. As Triggs announced the project, he stood overlooking a newly planted vineyard — significantly, on the valley's west side, south of Oliver — and introduced winemaker Pascal Madevon.

Triggs and Vincor were convinced that the 32 hectares they had set aside on the slope above Osoyoos Lake enjoyed all the elements that could combine to produce a truly unique wine. The terroir of clay, rock, sand and gravelly loam was considered more complex than some, with an exposure given to somewhat more moderate temperatures combined with good diurnals from the proximity of the lake.

VINCOR'S SECRET WEAPON TURNED OUT TO BE MADEVON, who was seduced by the beauty of the Okanagan on his first visit but was also convinced by what he perceived as being ideal terroir. The challenge of bringing an Old World style to the Okanagan was significant, particularly in producing wines for aging rather than immediate consumption. But while the project leaders didn't shy away from a degree of hyperbole — calling their wine "Le Grand Vin" — even they didn't invoke the uniquely Bordelaise notion of "First Growth."

Osoyoos Larose took time to work its way into consumers' hearts and palates — soon finding its way onto better wine lists as a flagship wine for the Okanagan. Madevon's blend quickly evolved from just three varieties in the inaugural 2001 vintage (66 percent Merlot, 25 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, nine percent Cabernet Franc) to include small amounts of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot.

Madevon has since moved on to reconnect with Don Triggs at Culmina Family Estate Winery, the spectacular new

project undertaken with his wife Elaine and their daughter Sara. After the sale of Vincor and of their own Delaine Estate in Niagara, the Triggs family looked for an ideal vineyard site on which to pursue what Don Triggs likes to call his legacy.

Hypothesis, Madevon's blend of Cabernet Franc (40 percent), Merlot (36 percent) and Cabernet Sauvignon (24 percent), seems already destined to become an icon, with hallmark cassis and dusty hints followed by a full-bodied palate of red and black fruit, leather notes with layers of spice and minerality, wrapped in juicy acidity. The 2011 scored impressive ratings across the board. Given the excellence of subsequent vintages, it would appear that the groundwork has been indeed well laid.

Now in its 10th vintage, Laughing Stock Portfolio (45 percent Merlot, 25 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 22 percent Cabernet Franc, seven percent Malbec and one percent Petit Verdot) can be justly crowned as another winner with a well-thought-out Bordeaux-inspired heritage. Laughing Stock co-owner David Enns spent considerable time in Bordeaux during the winery's formative stage, developing a plan for a premium house style that would emulate the region's Old World structure and age-ability. Recent vertical tastings suggest the wine has plenty of life in the bottle, with the current vintage (2012) recommended to cellar up to 10 years.

Much coveted, Painted Rock Red Icon is what the name intends right out of the gate, scooping a Lieutenant Governor's Award for its inaugural 2007 release. Noted BC wine guru John Schreiner was quick to dub Red Icon a "cult winery." Owners Trish and John Skinner work with noted Bordeaux consultant Alain Sutare to produce their blend (31 percent Malbec, 28 percent Merlot, 26 percent Cabernet Franc, 15 percent Petit Verdot).

One of the first Okanagan principals to take his wines to China, Skinner now earmarks around 10 percent of the winery's small production for that market. It would appear that his efforts have paid off: On some Shanghai lists, Red Icon commands prices as high as \$950 — offering formidable proof that this wine may well indeed be truly iconic. ★