

High Latitude, **LOW ATTITUDE**

OUR BRITISH
 COLUMBIA SOMM
 CAMP REVEALS
 SPECTACULAR
 WINEGROWING IN
 WESTERN CANADA

story and photos by **Randy Caparoso**

This past March 20–24, a dozen of our most inquisitive sommeliers bravely went where few members of the trade have gone before, exploring the sub-regions and cutting-edge winegrowing of Canada’s British Columbia as part of *The Somm Journal*’s SOMM Camp, co-sponsored by the British Columbia Wine Institute (winebc.com).

How extreme is British Columbia? Put it this way: Only the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer and Champagne are as far north. As in the northernmost European climate zones, bodies of water are moderating factors. Okanagan Valley—where over 95% of B.C. wines are grown—is essentially a chain of lakes running 120 miles from north to south. Yet there is little homogeneity about the region. Marie Mertz, chef/owner/sommelier of *Todo un Poco* in Elk Grove, tells us, “*Everything* about the Okanagan is extreme—not just terroir and climate, which goes from very cool to unexpectedly hot, but also in respect to the people, whose transformation of their region within the space of a few years has been nothing short of a miracle.”



Somm Campers feeling Okanagan energy at Osoyoos Lake.



According to data supplied by the British Columbia Wine Institute, in 1990 there were just 17 British Columbia wineries, although at the time grapes like Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Merlot, Riesling, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon (the most widely planted varieties in B.C. today) were virtually non-existent. The number of wineries “exploded” to 66 by 2001, and today there are over 270, and counting.

David Kristiansen, the lead sommelier of Pebble Beach Resorts, calls British Columbia a “paradox.” Says Kristiansen, “We spent three days at basically 1,000 to 2,000 feet above sea level, in vineyards clustered along lakes surrounded by snow-covered mountains, all part of a desert range averaging less than 14 inches of rain a year. What was amazing was the diversity—silt and gravel soils producing crisp clean whites and delicate reds in the north, and towards the south, sandy, sagebrush crowned hills producing ripe yet elegant reds.

Kelvin DeBoeur, CMS, representing John Howie Steak in Bellevue, WA, says, “The best way to explain B.C. to peers is to say it is a desert—a very northerly desert. What’s intriguing is that within the 120-mile stretch of Okanagan Valley you find nearly all possible environments for grapes—ideal for Riesling and Pinot Noir, and also Viognier, Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon . . . all with very crisp, food friendly acidity, and very expressive terroir complexities.”

Chevis Scott, sommelier at San Francisco’s Nostra, describes the “commonality” in B.C. whites, reds, pinks as well as sparklers as “high acid and lingering spice.” Jienna Basaldu, CS, CSW, of Sacramento’s Sutter Club expounds: “British Columbia was beautiful and serene—I thought I was in Switzerland on Lake Geneva. It also seems to be a gathering place for extremely talented winemakers and viticulturists not just from Canada, but also from Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy and South America. Everything seemed so new, so raw (in a good way) and untouched . . . there’s nothing like it!”



At the sparkling wine reception at Bonfire Restaurant at Cove Lakeside Resort, somms Rob Renteria, Diego Garcia, Chevis Scott, Britt Hastings toast to BC SOMM Camp.

Sparkling Wine and an “Across-the-Street-to-Fork” Reception

Sparkling wine is a natural fit in a region known for cold-climate viticulture, so this was the dominant theme at our opening reception in the Bonfire Restaurant, located in The Cove Lakeside Resort along the western shores of Okanagan Lake. Jay Drysdale, owner/winemaker of Bella Wines, christened the occasion with a pair of *méthode champenoise* **Bella Bruts**: one from Chardonnay, and the other a beautifully translucent pink rosé made completely from Gamay Noir.

Said Drysdale, “We are the only British Columbia winery specializing 100% in bubbly. It makes sense to me because sparkling wines are what I love best, and you always do best what you love most. It’s also because we get a natural acidity in B.C. grapes that is unlike anywhere else in the world, producing gentle yet vivid, elegant styles of sparkling wine.” Kristiansen praises the Bella Sparkling Gamay Rosé in particular as “an intriguing mix of citrus, cherries, rhubarb and blood orange, complimented with savory sage and rosemary herbal notes.”

We also tasted a steely dry, finely beaded, deeply yeasted **Tantalus Vineyards Riesling Natural Brut** (zero dosage) crafted from this East Kelowna/Okanagan Valley estate’s oldest vines (Riesling planted in 1978—among the first *Vitis vinifera* in B.C.). Then there was the **Summerhill Pyramid Winery 1998 Cipes Ariel Premier Cuvée**—the *current* commercial release from this winery known for its organic/biodynamic winegrowing as well as for

aging all of its bottlings under an actual four-story-high pyramid, to connect the wines with the “soul of the world.” Whether you subscribe to this belief or not, the '98 tasted beautifully fresh, fine and silky, with the caramelized, biscuity yeast complexity of classic late disgorged *méthode champenoise*.

Basaldu, however, was just as impressed by the “world-class” cuisine prepared by Bonfire Executive Chef Brian Fowke, which she described as “across-the-street-to-fork”—ingredients for dishes like cream of roasted winter cauliflower soup with langoustine and rainbow trout caviar, sourced from local gardens and waters, beautifully matched to a silken fine, citrusy, unusually peppercorn-spiced **Mission Hill 2014 Terroir Collection Okanagan Valley Viognier**. Howling Bluff Estate Winery owner/winemaker Luke Smith was also on hand to pour the **Howling Bluff 2014 Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon** with a free-run



Author Randy Caparoso with British Columbia Wine Institute Marketing Manager Kimberley Barnes at the welcome reception.

quail with local mushroom risotto. Kristiansen described this wine as having “perfect balance of ripe grapefruit, aromatic, spring citrus blossoms and lemon balm/lemon-verbena herbal tones . . . nervy and mineral-driven on the palate.”



Okanagan Valley

(East and West Kelowna)

By 9:00 a.m. our bright-eyed sommeliers were walking on the west facing slopes of Tantalus Vineyards, looking down upon the north end of Okanagan Lake, where New Zealand-born and -trained winemaker David Paterson showed us some of the earliest plantings of Riesling and Pinot Noir in British Columbia. “We are cold climate in terms of degree days,” explained Paterson, “but we do experience short, angry, hot summers before cooling off before the harvest. Subsequently, we get excellent flavor accumulation at relatively lower sugars. It may be difficult to ripen Syrah up here, but we can make a more mineral style of Chardonnay and Riesling.”



During the Riesling Focus seminar immediately following at Tantalus Vineyards, we tasted the wines of eight top producers, starting with a steely, lip smacking, citrusy **Tantalus 2013 Old Vine Riesling** and a flowery, fleshy,

Sommeliers and winemakers after the Riesling Focus tasting at Tantalus Vineyards. Winemaker panelists included Galen Barnhardt (Monte Creek), Michael Alexander (Summerhill Pyramid), David Paterson (Tantalus), Ingo Grady (Mission Hill) and Leo Gebert (St. Hubertus).

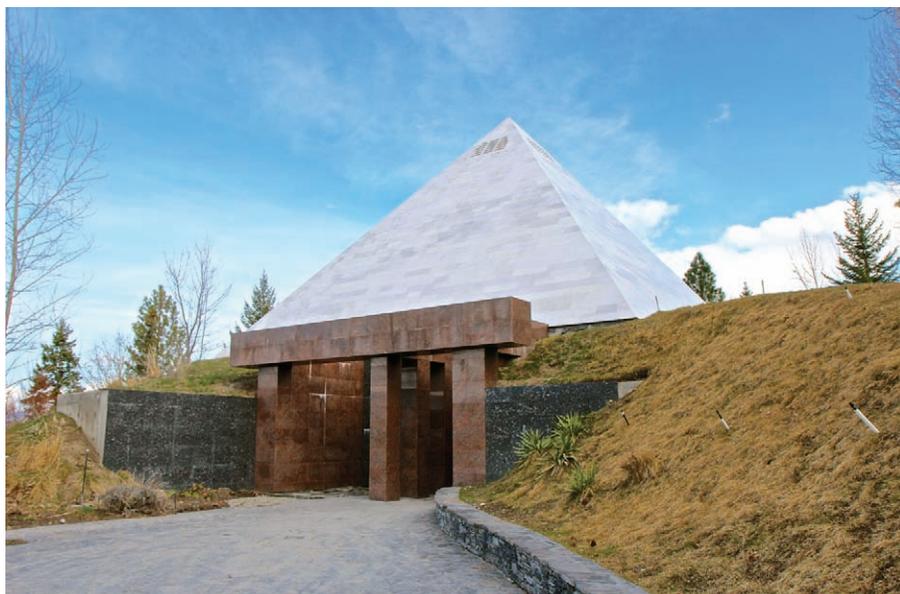
apple-crisp 2015 Tantalus Okanagan Valley Riesling. With age, says Paterson, B.C. Rieslings increase in “petrol/diesel, marmalade or burnt toast complexities.” Kristiansen reflects upon Okanagan Valley Rieslings as “more in line with Australian flavor profiles like Clare or Eden Valley, but with a touch riper fruit, limey with a fresh orange, also more flint or minerality.” Kristiansen describes the 2013 Tantalus as “leesy, candlewax, mint, and pine oil,” while DeBoeur makes note of the wine’s “grapefruit, citronella, petrol and saffron.”

Basaldu concurs, stating, “I was blown away by quality of dry Rieslings like the Tantalus 2013 Old Vine, the **St. Hubertus 2013 Riesling** (Key lime, lemon and chervil perfumes)



Nichole Dishman, Marie Mertz and Kelvin DeBoeur at Tantalus Vineyards.

Summerhill Pyramid Winery.



and **Summerhill 2014 Pyramid Riesling** (mouth-watering peach).” Of special note was the **Monte 2015 Creek Ranch Riesling** from further north in Thompson Valley, where calcareous soils and 40-day cold steel fermentation result in an exotic, off-dry style with real Riesling delicacy (8 grams residual sugar, 12% alcohol), pungent with spicy gardenia, lime and lemon peel.

On the way to our next stop, at CedarCreek Estate in Okanagan Valley’s East Kelowna area, we stopped at Summerhill Pyramid Winery for a Kodak moment beneath their giant Champagne bottle levitating above the crystal-blue waters of Okanagan Lake, and, of course, a walk into their iconic pyramid—a visit Basaldu describes as “a wine geek amusement park.”

At CedarCreek Estate, winemaker Alexis Moore walked us up steep hillsides overlooking the lake, planted to multiple clones of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir dating as far back as 1991 (some of the oldest plantings in B.C.). “Okanagan Valley is different from other wine countries,” Moore told us; “here at the north end you find bedrock and silty lakeside soils where cold-climate varieties excel, whereas you can drive an hour to the south in places like Osoyoos [bumping

up against the Canadian/American border] to find soil that is almost pure sand, where warmer climate Rhône or Bordeaux grapes thrive.”

There on CedarCreek’s bright, early spring sun-soaked hill, Moore tasted us on a super-spicy, sharp yet silky, lemon, lime and flint laced **CedarCreek 2014 Old Vines Riesling**, followed by the equally mineral, partially concrete egg-fermented **CedarCreek 2014 Platinum-Block 5 Chardonnay**, tinged with flourishes of toasty French oak.

This was followed by a Pinot Noir Focus tasting at CedarCreek Estate: a tasting of 11 Pinot Noirs by eight producers that, as a group, spoke to the evolving, iconoclastic style—distinguished by moderate alcohol, keenly felt acid, lavish red fruit perfumes and a minerality often tinged by wild scrub-like (sagebrush or sweet woody herbs like pennyroyal and thyme) qualities—setting British Columbia apart from the rest of the Pinot-crazy world. Comments Kristiansen: “I have always held up Oregon Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays as the ‘bridge’ between the ripeness of California and the tart, mineral-driven wines of Burgundy. Now it seems to me that Okanagan Valley wines from these two grapes can be accurately

described as stylistic ‘bridges’ between Oregon and Burgundy.”

Several sommeliers have singled out the wild yeast-fermented **CedarCreek 2012 Platinum-Block 4 Pinot Noir** precisely for that coiled “tension,” as Kristiansen puts it, “between mature [but not overly ripe] fruit with edgy acid and the region’s signature mineral spine.” DeBoeur favors the **Meyer Family 2014 McLean Creek Pinot Noir** for its “terroir-driven minerality balanced by deliciously bright red fruit, herbal tea, red licorice and clove.” The **Summerhill 2012 Pyramid Pinot Noir** and **Mission Hill 2014 Reserve Pinot Noir** bottlings represent more gentle sides of Okanagan Valley Pinot, whereas the **Tantalus 2013 Pinot Noir**, while finely delineated in the nose, could be perceived as either rigidly austere or wonderfully granitic in density.

Our next stop was on the opposite side of Okanagan Lake, along the shores of West Kelowna, at Quails’ Gate Winery, founded by the Stewart family in 1989—as such, one of British Columbia’s modern-day pioneers. In a barrel room tasting personally conducted by owner Tony Stewart we found both sophistication and allegiance to Burgundian methodology in their dramatically balanced 2015 Chardonnay cuvées, all with varying dimensions of sweet, toasty French oak filling in the seams of densely compacted, mineral and lemony, acid-driven qualities—borne out in a finished bottling of **Quails’ Gate 2013 Stewart Family Reserve Chardonnay**.



CedarCreek Estate - Block 5 Platinum Chardonnay.

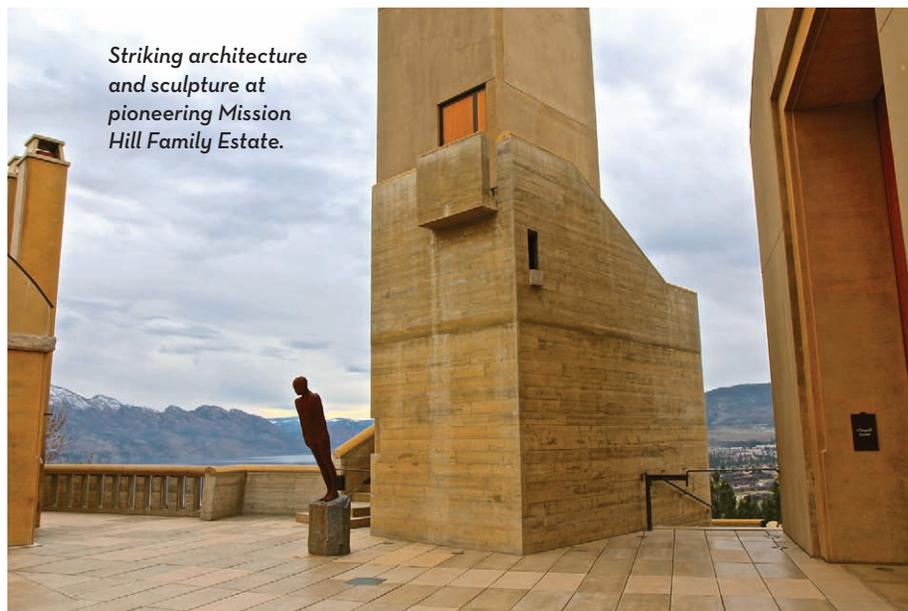
There is nothing like the sight of a vineyard rolling down a slanted hill to the very edges of a postcard-pretty waterway like Okanagan Lake. At Quails’ Gate, Stewart

walked us out to his Syrah block touching the lake and bathed in golden light—a site that he says ripens this Rhône grape well despite the cold-climate challenges of the upper Okanagan Valley. In fact, a bottle of **Quails' Gate 2013 The Boswell Syrah**—which Basaldu describes as “Côte-Rôtie heavenly”—was stunningly svelte yet masculine, wired with acidity, while effusive with roasted meat, bacon, olive brine, bay leaf and violet perfumes. World-class, yet uniquely “Okanagan.”

Our dinner at Quails' Gate, according to Scott, was “amazing ... for me, the best of our trip.” Quince poached spot prawns were served with a brilliantly acid-lit **2014 Bench 1775 Sauvignon Blanc**—possessing herbal,



Howling Bluff Estate winemaker-owner Luke Smith speaks at the Pinot Noir Focus.



Striking architecture and sculpture at pioneering Mission Hill Family Estate.

citrus skin and wild, *animale*-like nuances reminiscent of classic Pouilly-Fumé—as well as a gently tart, floral, imaginative **Quails' Gate 2015 Chasselas-Pinot Blanc-Pinot Gris**. The exotic spice dusting of the strawberryish fruit in an unusually Syrah-like, musclebound **Howling Bluff 2011 Summa Quies Vineyard Pinot Noir** brought out the star anise notes in a confit of duck with roasted beets.

Co-hosting the dinner at Quails' Gate was West Kelowna neighbor Mission Hill Family Estate—another pioneering Okanagan Valley producer, founded by Anthony von

Mandl in 1981. When introducing the magnificently deep, supple, cigarbox nuanced **Mission Hill Family Estate 2005 Oculus** (42% Merlot with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot), Mission Hill Director of Education Ingo Grady told us, “We are not a small operation, but we are extremely aspirational.” Grady also shared an accurate assessment of the emerging profile of British Columbia wines: “You can see that our wines are not like the rest of the New World, yet they are not quite Old World ... I like to think of them as ‘Next World.’”



The Quails' Gate Winery Syrah block, next to Okanagan Lake.





The Bench 1775 estate vineyard in Naramata Bench.



Naramata Bench, Skaha Bluffs, Golden Mile Bench and Black Sage Bench

The morning of our second day started on the eastern edge of Okanagan Lake south, in a clearly defined (yet still unofficial) sub-region called Naramata Bench. There, we met with Bench 1775 Winery's Val Tait, one of B.C.'s most esteemed grower/winemakers. Or as Tait puts it: "I am a viticulturist first and winemaker second—my priority is to capture character in vineyards, not screw it up in a winery."

The Okanagan Valley, Tait explained, is a "glacial lake" carved out by periodic catastrophic flooding occurring 2.5 million to 10,000 years ago. "Here on Naramata Bench we plant on the original uplifted earth's crust in a mixture of silt, rock, gravel and sand deposits, contributing to the minerality, acidity and everything that's beautiful about Okanagan." Tait also talked about their condensed growing season: "It may not seem like cold winters and hot summers add up to ideal conditions; but remember, we are at a higher latitude, which gives us very long hours of ripening during the day. The lake also has a great moderating effect, which is why you often see German varieties growing right next to Bordeaux, Burgundian or Rhône grapes, often successfully." Indeed, Okanagan Valley producers grow minerally Chardonnay, plush Merlot and edgy Zweigelt in the same sites as dry Riesling or

Riesling Icewine—not to mention beautiful, natural Icewines made from Chardonnay, Merlot or Zweigelt!

The Sauvignon Blanc cultivated by Tait at the water's edge on Naramata Bench is craftily picked as many as four different times, at Brix levels ranging from a greener 21° to more tropical 24°. Lower sugars, says Tait, "give gooseberry, grapefruit and wild, *sauvage* qualities to Sauvignon Blanc," and small additions of Sémillon add "roundness and further nuances, like orange peel." Like other Naramata Bench producers, Tait also farms extensively further south in Osoyoos. Tait elaborates: "With Syrah, for instance, we can get linear, beautiful red fruit and peppery spice in Naramata, whereas in Osoyoos the grapes' response mechanism to much brighter light and often painfully hot climate is to develop thicker skins, resulting in Syrahs with lower acids but denser tannins and jammier black fruit . . . heavier yet still lavish, complex expressions of the varietal."

Skaha Bluffs, located on the eastern edge of Skaha Lake (south of Okanagan Lake), was the site of our next stop: Painted Rock Estate Winery, founded by John and Trish Skinner in 2004. If the sommeliers were impressed by Okanagan Lake settings, they were bowled over by Painted Rock's. Says

Bench 1775 winemaker-viticulturist Val Tait in the Sauvignon Blanc block.



Painted Rock Estate owner-grower John Skinner leads a tasting of the winery's red.



Painted Rock Estate Syrah.

Chef Mertz: "Who can forget the beauty and tranquility of a place like Painted Rock? It has that specialness that translates directly into the wines—especially their uniquely styled Cabernet Franc and Syrah, as well as their Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and fantastic red Bordeaux blend. Even their Bordeaux blend dry rosé seems to jump out of the glass with cranberry, raspberry and citrus notes, and perfect acidity that went great with my salmon lunch."

According to Skinner: "We were advised to specialize in Bordeaux varieties by our

consultant, Alain Sutre, who still visits us from France six times a year. Skaha Bluffs is ideal because the lake is shallower than Okanagan Lake to the north, giving us a slightly warmer terroir, yet still cool enough to give our wines a compact, structured feel and pure fruit perfumes with positive herbal qualities—very ‘Bordeaux.’” The **Painted Rock 2014 Cabernet Franc** stood out for its billowing raspberry nose with minty, sweet kitchen herbiness underpinned by zesty, velvety texturing, although the aptly named **Painted Rock 2013 Icon** (32% Merlot and 29% Cabernet Franc with Petit Verdot, Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon) epitomizes the estate with its pervasive cigar box, dried herb, blackcurrant concentration tucked into a seamless, sumptuous, elegantly balanced, medium-weighted body—again, very “Bordeaux,” yet still “Skaha.”

Lunch at Painted Rock was followed by a Chardonnay Focus tasting presented by seven producers. Val Tait led off with



Checkmate Artisanal Winery GM and winemaker Philip McGahan.



A horizontal of the inaugural Chardonnays from Checkmate Artisanal Winery.



The Somm Campers at Culmina Family Estate with owner-grower Don Triggs (hat) and daughter Sara Triggs (right of Don Triggs).

two bottlings of **Bench 1775 Winery Chardonnay**, describing her citrusy fresh, lean, minerally, vaguely herbal 2014 as “post-modern” in style, and her stainless steel-fermented, flinty, citrusy, mildly leesy 2012 as a wine that has led people to discover that “they really never ‘hated’ Chardonnay, they just hated the taste of oak.” Even more contemporary was the **Painted Rock Estate 2014 Chardonnay**, which came across as tart, taut, meaty and grippy with Meyer lemon, orange, and a slightly feral, *sauvage*-like minerality. The citrus and mineral threads of Okanagan Valley style Chard were also found in a mildly tropical **Mission Hill 2013 Lone Pine Chardonnay**, a lithe, lilting **Burrowing Owl 2013 Chardonnay** and a muscular, minerally **Meyer Family 2014 Tribute Series Chardonnay**.

Our next stop was at Checkmate Artisanal Winery, also owned by Mission Hill’s von Mandl family. Checkmate is B.C.’s latest temple of Chardonnay—the varietal that originally awakened the wine world to the possibilities of British Columbia in 2004, when a Mission Hill took the title of “Top Chardonnay In the World” at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London. What is remarkable about this project is that it was founded on the premise of taking advantage of global climate change by spotlighting Okanagan Valley’s higher latitude terroirs, particularly the higher-elevation Golden Mile Bench VQA (where the Checkmate winery is located) and the adjoining Black Sage Bench (where vineyards are cultivated in meager loamy sand, hundreds of feet deep).

GM/winemaker Philip McGahan led us

through a 2013 horizontal of the inaugural releases: five **Checkmate Artisanal Winery Chardonnays**, each focused entirely on single vineyard expression—meaning, barrel or foudre fermentation with minimal influence of oak flavor except to accent the minerality, citrusy acidity and subtle variations of varietal fruit. Says Kristiansen: “All the Checkmates were solid and restrained; long tangy finishes with no sharp edges; pure citrus or apple, some touching upon stone or tropical fruit, and all with lifted, floral, savory notes and pure, elegant minerality . . . I could have spent an hour contemplating those wines!”

The meditative mountaintop feel of Checkmate definitely carried over to our next stop on Golden Mile Bench at the neighboring Culmina Family Estate Winery, founded by Don, Elaine and Sara Triggs in 2007. This is another no-stone-left-untuned estate, planted on 1,600- to 2,000-foot elevation slopes replete with seemingly all the white, calcareous stones in the world mixed with sand and silt. Bordeaux viticulturist/winemaker Alain Sutre also consults here, presiding over the micro-block management of primarily red Bordeaux varieties, plus Chardonnay, Syrah and a modest block of Grüner Veltliner on the highest bluff.

“Culmina,” says Chef Mertz, “is clearly a labor of love by someone who knows what he’s doing, after over 35 years in the wine industry.” (Triggs was a founder of Canada’s enormously successful Jackson-Triggs Winery, now owned by Constellation Brands). The sommeliers could also taste this consummate passion in the **Culmina 2013**



Tinhorn Creek Vineyard's winemaker Andrew Windsor pours for Kristina Long, Rob Renteria, Jienna Basaldu and Diego Garcia.



Hypothesis (Merlot/Cabernet Franc/Cabernet Sauvignon, to be called Thesis when released in the U.S.), which epitomizes the British Columbia approach to “Bordeaux”—tightly wound, the opposite of “big,” yet enormously concentrated in silky, savory, cassis-like fruit.

At our next stop in the Golden Mile Bench, we met with Tinhorn Creek Vineyards winemaker Andrew Windsor, who brings an international flair (Australia, New Zealand, France) to this winery, co-founded by President/CEO (and former head winemaker) Sandra Oldfield in 1993. Among the outstanding bottlings tasted after a barrel tasting with Windsor: a light, herby/strawberryish, Chinon-like **Tinhorn Creek 2015 Cabernet Franc Rosé**; a gloriously floral, peppery-spiced, off-dry, impeccably balanced **Tinhorn Creek 2014 Gewürztraminer**; and a **Tinhorn Creek 2014 Golden Mile Bench Chardonnay**, finishing with the minerally, leesy, citrusy tart, classic qualities of the Okanagan style.

As purple skies fell into a bone chilling night, we sat down to a lavish spread of charcuterie and wood oven pizzas with Jesse Cooper, assistant winemaker of Black Hills Estate—another modern day pioneer (est. 1995), primarily focused on wines grown in the warmer, sandy, rugged “desert” terroir of Black Sage Bench, at the south end of Okanagan Valley. “Black Sage Road,” Cooper told us, “is the Silverado Trail of Canada.” But this is no idle chatter: The Black Hills Estate *Nota Bene*—blends of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc—has enjoyed a level of prestige in Canada comparable to a Robert Mondavi or Beaulieu Private Reserve since the late ‘90s, with the goods to back it up.

Cases in point: a gorgeously velvet textured, cassis/cigar box–infused **Black Hills 2012 Nota Bene**, which we were able to compare to a 2007 *Nota Bene* that was still dense, meaty and effusive with classic cedar, black tea and blackcurrant complexity. The deep mounds of sand dunes, endless summer days and angry heat of Black Sage Bench also make an ideal incubator for Rhône grapes, which ripen with thick skins redolent with pungent phenolics. The **Black Hills 2014 Viognier**, for instance, is almost deliriously spicy, fleshy, dense, yet pure and crisply balanced, its honeysuckle and tropical flower fragrances as thick as the proverbial warm South. The **Black Hills 2013 Syrah** is a chunky yet buoyant, fluid powerhouse, palpable with roasted lardon and smoked bacon woven with pristine violet perfumes.

Twilight in British Columbia: the winery at Black Hills Estate.

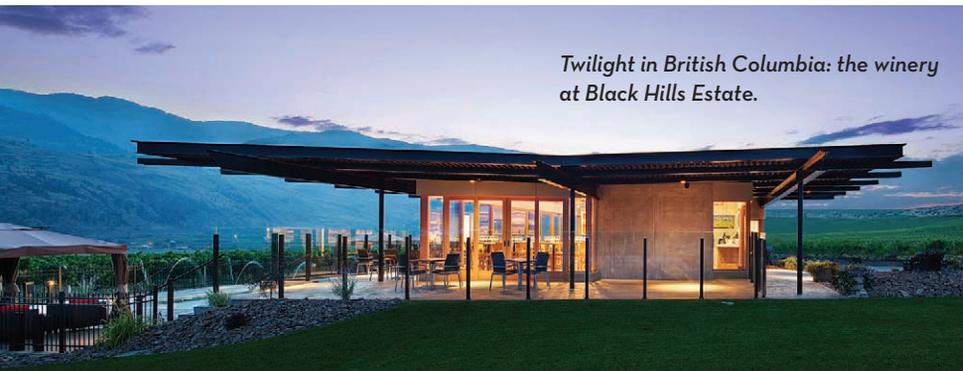
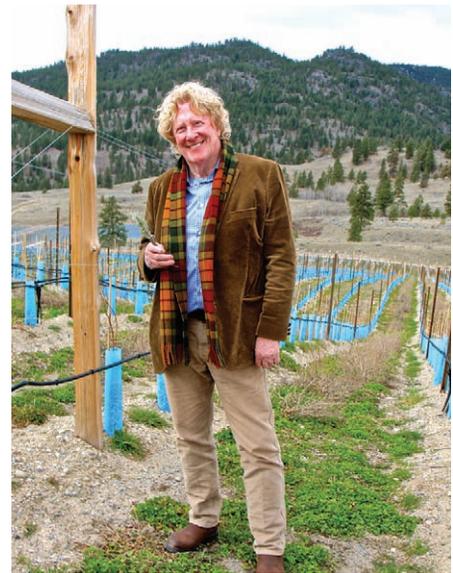


PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACK HILLS ESTATE



Dried Cabernet Sauvignon in Passion Pit Vineyard in Similkameen Valley.

Summerland, Similkameen Valley and Osoyoos Lake



Okanagan Crush Pad consultant David Scholefield shows calcareous slope and native sagebrush vegetation at Garnet Valley Ranch.

Our final morning started at Okanagan Crush Pad in Summerland, an unofficial sub-region on the western shores of Okanagan Lake’s south end. While founded in 2011 by Christine Coletta and Steve Lornie as a custom crush facility, Okanagan Crush Pad has emerged as an industry leader in organic viticulture (incorporating sustainable elements of biodynamic farming) as well as a systematic adherence to a level of natural winemaking that would be considered extreme, even dubious, in, say, most parts of California, Oregon or Washington.

In a formal presentation by Okanagan



Crush Pad consultants Alberto Antonini (an internationally respected Italian enologist) and influential Vancouver wine personality David Scholefield, along with winemaker Matt Dumayne, our sommeliers were struck by the focus on uncompromising purity in wines bottled under the winery's two house brands, Haywire and Narrative. Scholefield started things out by stating: "We are Canadians, hopelessly



The Haywire line of natural wines from Okanagan Crush Pad.

self-deprecating and insecure, so early on we felt we had to ape California wine with techniques like spinning cones and reverse osmosis. What we came to realize is that if we focus on making wines more authentic to our grapes, we can discover the quality in our own wine regions."

Antonini was adamant about saying, "Use of barrels can be devastating to authenticity of wines." While understanding that, say, concrete- rather than barrel-aged Chardonnay or Pinot Noir may be less appealing to many consumers, Antonini contends: "You can make wine for the market or let the market find your wines, but when you make wine for the market you can lose your authenticity. We want to start with good grapes and do less with them, but as Pedro Parra (Okanagan Crush Pad's Chile-based viticultural consultant) always reminds us, the goal is to make *better* wine, not more natural wine."

Says Scott, "I like their approach of doing less to express 'place not grape,' which I could definitely taste in their wines . . . you could feel this different kind of energy throughout their winery, visible in all their tools (concrete tanks, eggs, amphora, etc)." Mertz's impressions: "Meeting Alberto Antonini and learning his philosophy about taking risks, especially that 'to do nothing

you need to know a lot'—by mixing innovation with past experiences, and doing less to grapes to get more expression of terroir in the glass—was very refreshing. It's not always that you hear about winemakers who are humble enough to say, 'It is not about me,' allowing wines and vineyards to speak for themselves.

Of course, since *in vino veritas*, Kristiansen proffers this summary of the Okanagan Crush Pad wines tasted: "The orange wines [Haywire 2014 Free Form White made from Sauvignon Blanc, and Haywire 2013 Free Form White from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc] and *méthode ancestrale* sparkling wine [Narrative 2013 Ancient Method] were intriguing but geeky, their Sauvignon Blanc [Haywire 2014 Waters & Banks] and Pinot Gris [concrete tank samples of Haywire Switchback] were all transparent, fresh and delicious, showcasing the vineyard first and leaving winery input to a minimum."

After a walk through Okanagan Crush Pad's most recently planted site—their calcareous Garnet Valley Ranch which, at 2,000-plus feet, qualifies as British Columbia's highest-elevation vineyard—we boarded our minicoach to head out to Similkameen Valley—a VQA separate from Okanagan Valley, located just west of Osoyoos. "Similkameen," Kristiansen says,

"is truly majestic—a sweeping green valley surrounded by high, snow-covered mountain peaks." It is also startlingly diverse; there we experienced some of British Columbia's finest and most precisely balanced Rieslings, growing right alongside the most amazing Gamays and definitive Syrahs.

We discovered why that is during a walk through the Passion Pit Vineyard, a hillside planting located next to a longtime gravel pit. Little Farm Winery owner/winemaker Rhys Pender, MW, explained: "The gravelly loam of this site is loaded with calcium carbonate, better known as limestone, which contributes to the minerality and balancing acidity in wines. Similkameen Valley itself is crazy windy—a tad colder as well as hotter than Okanagan Valley, with summer diurnal swings as much as 50 degrees."

In a tasting at Orofino Vineyards with owner/winemakers John and Virginia Weber, we tasted three Orofino Similkameen Valley Rieslings marked by live-wire lemony tartness, mineral sensations, and fragrances ranging from citrus to marmalade and fusel. Pender showed two razor-sharp single-vineyard bottlings of Little Farm Rieslings with lemon, Mandarin orange and mineral/sagebrush fragrances. The citrusy and stony/oyster shell textured Little Farm 2014 Mulberry Tree Vineyard Chardonnay seemed like the closest thing to Chablis



At Orofino Vineyards in Similkameen Valley: Jesus Evangelista, Diego Garcia, Rob Renteria and Britt Hastings.



tasted in B.C., only with a sagebrush minerality strikingly unique to Similkameen.

Our sommeliers seemed equally enthralled by a strawberry-bright, sleek and zesty **Orofino 2014 Celentano Vineyard Gamay**, as well as the chunky, teeming, earth/mineral laced **Orofino 2014 Wild Ferment Syrah** and **Orofino 2013 Scout Vineyard Syrah**. Perhaps the most terroir-driven wine of all was the **Orofino 2012 Passion Pit Cabernet Sauvignon**, layered with peppermint spiced, cocoa coated black fruit, couched in a strikingly lanky medium body and finishing with distinctive sensations of graphite, echoes of compost, and vaguely resinous wild sagebrush.

Our next stop was back to the southernmost edge of Okanagan Valley in a vineyard planted in fluffy, moon-dust-like sand alongside Osoyoos Lake—Laughing Stock Vineyards' Perfect Hedge Vineyard. Warm climate, a semi-desert aridness, wild sage native vegetation and a slightly alkaline soil with almost no moisture-holding capacity all have a direct impact on the wines, such as the fleshy, ultra-concentrated, peppery, perfumed, almost briny-textured **Laughing Stock 2014 Viognier** and **Laughing Stock 2014 Amphora Viognier/Roussanne** (the latter skin contact-fermented).



Somm Campers Nichole Dishman and Marie Mertz at Laughing Stock's Perfect Hedge Vineyard.

Explained Laughing Stock owner/viticulturist Cynthia Enns, who works hand-in-glove with her husband, co-owner/winemaker David Enns, "This is desert



A double-blind Syrah tasting at Nk'Mip Cellars (Chevis Scott in foreground).

winegrowing, but we get over 15 hours a day of sunlight, with winds whipping through the last few hours of each day, spreading the volatile oils of native vegetation around." We could taste this directly in the sagebrush spice, jammy/phenolic fruit, flowery violet perfume and natural acid lifted qualities of the **Laughing Stock 2013 Syrah**. We found similar scrubby notes, compact phenolics and lifted perfume qualities mingling in the cassis, black cherry and blackberry notes of the **Laughing Stock 2013 Portfolio** (41% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Sauvignon balanced by Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot).

At nearby Nk'Mip Cellars (pronounced *inkameep*)—self-billed as "North America's first Aboriginal winery"—we tasted an even wider range of original, exciting wines grown in Osoyoos Lake terroir. Chef Mertz makes special note of the **Nk'Mip 2015 Dreamcatcher** (Riesling/Sauvignon Blanc/Ehrenfelser), describing it as "just brilliant . . . great aromatic notes, tropical flavors, balancing acidity." The steady Canadian movement away from oak over-ripeness was refreshingly evident in a flinty, airy, Chablis-like **Nk'Mip 2014 Chardonnay Reserve**; and the **Nk'Mip 2014 Riesling Icewine** was a silky, sharply pinpoint revelation, screaming for Gorgonzola Dolce, if not ankimo or foie gras with natural fruit infusions.

Our visit to Nk'Mip Cellars was capped by a double-blind tasting of five

Syrachs, which gave us a better handle on the unique terroir-driven complexities to be found in British Columbia. DeBoeur gives kudos to the **Quails' Gate 2013 The Boswell**—which he says "could have easily been mistaken for a Northern Rhône with the green olive and green peppercorn notes to its black and blue fruit, smoke and curing spices—as well as to the **Painted Rock Estate 2013 Syrah**, which was "even bolder, a little more New World." Rob Renteria of San Francisco's La Folie praised the **Burrowing Owl 2012 Syrah** for its "pretty, harmonious qualities"—its Syrah spiciness imbued with dark roast coffee-like smokiness. The **Nk'Mip 2013 Syrah** was even more concentrated, dense and velvety, its meaty-textured fruit finishing with coffee grinder spice, while the **Summerhill 2011 Pyramid** was more of an outlier with its deliberately restrained, Saint-Joseph-like medium weight and clarity of flowery fruit.

A close-up of fine, sandy "moon dust" soil at Laughing Stock's Perfect Hedge Vineyard.



Farewell Dinner Thoughts

At our farewell dinner generously hosted by Tinhorn Creek Vineyards at their spectacular Miradoro Restaurant—overlooking the expanse of Golden Mile Bench, deep into hills of Black Sage Bench extending all the way to Osoyoos Lake—our sommeliers talked about the exciting prospects for British Columbia wines, particularly in terms of their own wine programs. Says Chef Mertz, “British Columbia is one of the wine world’s best kept secrets, which is to say that they seem a little shy about what they have to offer despite what they have been able to achieve with their cool climates and aromatic wines with such great acidity.”

Kristiansen opines, “I like that British Columbia is more aligned to Old World than to New World sensibilities—‘hungry’ wines that scream for food, almost saké-like in their purity, minerality and savoriness . . . what geeky sommeliers wouldn’t want to drink or sell that?” Adds Scott, “I heard Cynthia Enns at Laughing Stock saying, ‘Thanks for visiting but don’t tell too many people, because we kind of like being undiscovered.’ I’d love to share what we discovered about the region with other sommeliers, but I can understand why, with their low production, they might want to save it all for themselves.”

All the same, says Britt Hastings of Meadowood Napa Valley, “I think wines like their Riesling, Gamay, Cabernet Franc and Syrah are so amazing, I’d love to see more of them on American wine lists . . . but if not, I could see myself moving up here within the next ten years because of what I learned on this trip!” SJ

The British Columbia SOMM CAMP SOMMELIERS

Jienna Basaldu CS, CSW – Sutter Club (Sacramento, CA)

Kelvin DeBoer CMS – John Howie Steak (Bellevue, WA)

Nichole Dishman CMS – Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay (Half Moon Bay, CA)

Jesus Evangelista – The Montage Hotel (Beverly Hills, CA)

Diego Garcia – The Kitchen Restaurant/Selland Family Restaurants (Sacramento, CA)

Brittany Hastings – Meadowood Napa Valley (St. Helena, CA)

David Kristiansen – Pebble Beach Resorts (Pebble Beach, CA)

Kristina Long – Hawksworth Restaurant (Vancouver, BC)

Marie Mertz – Todo un Poco (Elk Grove, CA)

Robert Renteria – La Folie (San Francisco, CA)

Chevis Scott – Nostra Spaghetteria (San Francisco, CA)

Dawn Smith – John Howie Steak (Bellevue, WA)

Participating British Columbia SOMM CAMP WINERIES

Bench 1775 Winery (bench1775.com)

Bella Wines (bellawines.com)

Black Hills Estate Winery (blackhillswinery.com)

Burrowing Owl Estate Winery (bowwine.com)

CedarCreek Estate Winery (cedarcreek.bc.ca)

Checkmate Artisanal Winery (checkmatewinery.com)

Culmina Family Estate Winery (culmina.ca)

Howling Bluff Estate Winery (howlingbluff.ca)

Laughing Stock Vineyards (laughingstock.ca)

Little Farm Winery (littlefarm.ca)

Martin’s Lane (missionhillwinery.com)

Meyer Family Vineyards (mfwines.com)

Mission Hill Family Estate Winery (missionhillwinery.com)

Monte Creek Ranch Winery (montecreekranchwinery.com)

Nk’Mip Cellars (nkmipcellars.com)

Okanagan Crush Pad (okanagancrushpad.com)

Orofino Vineyards (orofinovineyards.com)

Painted Rock Estate Winery (paintedrock.ca)

Quails’ Gate Winery (quailsgate.com)

St. Hubertus & Oak Bay Estate Winery (st-hubertus.bc.ca)

Summerhill Pyramid Winery (summerhill.bc.ca)

Tantalus Vineyards (tantalus.ca)