

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE OKANAGAN

LOCATION:

The Okanagan is a north-south valley the Canadian province of British Columbia. Starting at the 49th parallel, the border with the United States, the Okanagan Valley goes north approximately 120 kilometers. The Okanagan is actually an extension of Washington State's Columbia growing region. The Okanagan is approximately 3.5 hours to the east of Vancouver, the largest internationally known population centre, while the cities of Vernon, Kelowna, Penticton and Oliver help identify the region to Canadians. At 49 – 50° North Latitude, the Okanagan is North America's northern-most wine growing region and is on the same latitude as the Rheingau of Germany and the Champagne region of France.

HISTORY:

The Okanagan wine industry's history starts with the first plantings of grapes by Father Charles Pandosy, an Oblate Missionary, who planted fruits and vines at the Okanagan Mission across the lake from Kelowna. Through the first half of the 20th Century, the industry struggled with inferior grapes and protectionist policies. With the creation of "Estate" wineries in the 1970s and the Free Trade Agreement of 1988, the industry had to adapt to the world wine industry or fail. Plantings dropped from 5,000 acres of vines to less than 1,000 and the industry was seen as being on its last legs. The remaining 1,000 acres, however, belonged to dedicated growers and were premium grape varieties. With the flood of poor quality wines pushed to the sides, the Okanagan began to build a solid reputation for small production of good to outstanding white wines. Leaders such as Bob Claremont and George Heiss of Gray Monk pioneered with some of the first "quality" wines out of the Okanagan.

TOPOGRAPHY:

Critical to understanding the Okanagan is that it is a north-south valley. This severely restricts the number of south facing vineyard sites available as most face directly east or directly west. Lying in the interior mountains of B.C., the Okanagan is a semi-arid desert region, especially in the southern Okanagan. The mountain peaks, reaching over 2450 meters, are extremely effective at removing moisture from the precipitation-bearing westerly winds. Rainfall drops from over 160 inches on Vancouver Island to 45-70 in Vancouver and down to 13 inches in Kelowna and 12 inches in Oliver-Osoyoos. Harvest also demonstrates the differences between the north and south Okanagan with harvest two weeks later, on average, in the northern Okanagan. Lake Okanagan and Lake Osoyoos provide a moderating effect on temperatures as water for irrigation. Large bodies of water act as heat traps and cool the hot desert temperatures during the day and prevent vineyards from freezing at night. The water for irrigation is also important in desert-like growing regions. Individual mesoclimates are also important. The vineyard directly below the MacIntyre Bluffs gets heat reflected off this south-facing wall directly into the vineyard. The reflected energy and lack of wind from the bluffs makes this vineyard much warmer than its neighbors.

CLIMATE:

While many people think of Canada as "cold" anyone who's been in the Okanagan during the summer knows how hot it can get! The average daily temperature at Osoyoos is 21.5° C – the same as Barossa in Australia! The southern Okanagan is Canada's only true desert region and rattlesnakes are common in the vineyards. As a desert region, the Okanagan's hot sun and longer summer days combine to create very hot growing conditions. Ripeness is generally not a problem. The concern is the cold nights which help keep the acid levels high. While higher acid levels can give wines freshness and life, they may be too high and growers must leave the grapes on the vines until the acids have dropped. This puts the grapes at risk of birds, rots and rain. The key concern is the risk of frost. Spring and fall frosts can kill buds before the grapes

before they can set as well as stopping photosynthesis in the fall before the grapes are fully ripe. The Okanagan is prized for grape growing because of the significantly lower risk of frost - Environment Canada indicates the risk of frost is 16% in Osoyoos, 17% in Kamloops, yet 40% in Keremios where vineyards would be away from the moderating effect of the lake.

PESTS:

Like all regions, birds are a major concern in the fall. Birds can strip a vineyard of its grapes in just a few hours. Bangers, tinfoil streamers and fake owls are all used to keep the birds out of the vineyards. Netting can be used, but is very expensive. Phylloxera affects less than 10% of the vineyards and most of the vines are on grafted rootstock - although more to control vigour or for attributes other than avoiding Phylloxera. Bears love the ripe grapes in the fall - an unusual concern in most wine regions of the world. Fencing has limited success in keeping a hungry bear out of the vineyard. Deer don't generally bother the grapes, but can ruin the leaves which in turn can affect ripening.

MAJOR GRAPE VARIETIES:

The Okanagan garners the most attention and awards for Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Cabernet Franc and Merlot which tend to favour the unique growing conditions in the Okanagan. As a new wine region, there is much experimentation and over 50 grape varieties are planted, many showing tremendous potential, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah for the reds to Riesling, Kerner and Ehrenfelser on the whites. As well, Riesling, Optima and Vidal make some of Canada's finest Icewines – the incredibly concentrated desert wines that have put Canada on the world wine map.

of Wineries 50 +

of Acres 3500 - 1998 in comparison with Ontario's 18,000 acres