

Vintage Report: British Columbia 2005

By James Cluer

BC vintners making high-quality wines from a smaller 2005 crop

Wineries are excited about the quality of the 2005 vintage, which is partly a result of yields being down an average of 15.3 per cent, to 14,084 short tons from 16,642 in 2004. "Quality looks exceptional across the board," commented Mark Sheridan, director of vineyard operations for Vincor, the Okanagan's largest wine producer. With generally fine weather throughout the 2005 season and improvements in viticultural and winemaking techniques, lovers of BC VQA wine are anticipating high quality wines — although they may be in short supply.

Richard Cleave, owner of R&R Vineyard Management and a long-time Okanagan grapegrower, stated that "quality was extremely high and 2005 could be one of the best vintages yet. We had beautiful weather through harvest, with no frost, and the later maturing varieties were left to hang until early November." Tom Di Bello, winemaker at CedarCreek Estate Winery, (Canada's Winery of the Year in 2005), was particularly pleased with the Pinot Noir, which he described as "super-high quality". These types of comments were repeated all around the Valley.

Winemakers from the vineyards in the central and northern parts of the Okanagan Valley also expressed considerable excitement about the quality of the aromatic white varieties. Quails' Gate winemaker Grant Stanley described 2005 as "an excellent year for natural acids in Riesling and Chenin Blanc," allowing him to follow his preferred non-interventionist winemaking techniques with minimal additions during fermentation. Stanley said the 2005 Chenin Blanc is one of the best he has produced. "The cooler season of 2005 has given the wine excellent natural acidity and exuberant bright

limey and mineral flavours. Chenin Blanc is a varietal that is perfect for our short but hot growing season. In an effort to build complexity in the wine, there is a small barrel-fermented portion, a technique used to enhance the palate weight without compromising the delicate fruit."

Mark Wendenburg, winemaker at Sumac Ridge, says this year's vintage is another in a long series of excellent Okanagan vintages. "The long hot summer days resulted in intensely flavoured wines," says Wendenburg. "For example, the 2005 Gewürztraminer is filled with lychee, Muscat and spicy notes, a hint of sweetness on the palate and a long, lingering finish." Winemakers were ecstatic about the quality of the 2005 Shiraz and Bordeaux red varieties. Tom Di Bello described the Shiraz as "gorgeous and certainly better than 2004," and Mark Sheridan categorically stated that the Shiraz was "world-class."

These comments may come as a surprise to British Columbians, who will remember the summer of 2005 as cooler than the previous two summers. Indeed, weather data from Vincor shows that in 2005, the average temperature was three per cent cooler than 2003 and 2004. However, Vincor's data also show that temperatures in 2005 were still 3.5 per cent warmer than average temperatures recorded between 1961 and 1990, and British Columbians may have become accustomed to unusually hot summers. In 2005, Vincor recorded 1,495 total degree days, significantly lower than the 1,682 degree days recorded in 2003.

The winter of 2004/2005 in the Okanagan was moderate with no major vine damage reported. Spring was cooler than usual, but the summer was quite warm. At Vincor's Osoyoos vineyard they recorded 378 degree days for July 2005 and 367 in August 2005, which were above the respective averages of 366 and 347 recorded between 1961 and 1990. Overall precipitation was similar to other years but June was wetter than normal and this affected flowering and fruit set. October was frost-free, enabling growers to pick at will.



As a result of wet weather during flowering, bunch weights were lighter than usual and berries smaller than average. Midge Wyse of Burrowing Owl Vineyards noted that “production is down considerably, particularly on Pinot Gris.” However, some varieties and growers were affected more than others, and CedarCreek said that total tonnage was “on target”.

The lower yields in 2005 is assisting winemakers with wine quality. “Yields were reduced by nature and we did not have to drop much crop at veraison,” said Grant Stanley at Quails’ Gate. With some blocks of Pinot Noir coming in at under two tons per acre, there are deep colors and high levels of concentration in the wines. The reduced crop size assisted growers to achieve full maturity, and Brix levels at harvest were as high as 26.2 on Vincor’s Merlot vineyard in Osoyoos. The 2005 harvest began seven to ten days later than in 2004, with most aromatic whites picked between September 15 and 30. Late maturing red varieties were left to hang until the end of October with Quails’ Gate picking the last of their Cabernet Sauvignon on November 5.

The Icewine harvest got underway during a cold snap on December 6 and 7 when temperatures plunged to minus 13 °C in parts of the Okanagan. The relatively early harvest was welcomed by Icewine producers. Sumac Ridge’s Mark Wendenburg noted “yields were higher because we harvested

in early December, with Brix levels reaching 45, and the weather staying cold for two to three days which took the pressure off winemakers and allowed for presses to operate during daylight.” Another cold snap in late February allowed another harvesting session. The total reported tonnage for the season was 253.4 tons.

2005 was an uneventful year for vineyard pests and diseases. Richard Cleave noted that “there was light pressure on diseases because growers sprayed early after the rain in June.” Grant Stanley noted no serious disease issues and continued to practice aggressive leaf removal during cooler vintages in order to open the canopy and reduce the necessity for sprays.

The dramatic growth in sales of BC wines combined with the smaller crop size has created pressure on grape supply. “The spot market for grapes was almost non-existent, and if you could find grapes they were usually very expensive,” remarked Mark Sheridan. Grape prices continue to remain high. During harvest there was a scramble for grapes to make up for the smaller crop. It is hoped that the large number of new plantings will ease pressure on grape supply. This may be optimistic given the timeframes for vineyards to come on-stream and the strong growth in BC wines sale, now just below \$134 million per year.