

Vintage Report: British Columbia 2006

“THE QUALITY OF THE GRAPES IS EXCEPTIONAL.”

◦ *Nirmal Gidda, Proprietor, Mount Boucherie Estate Winery on the 2006 harvest*

The quality of the 2006 harvest was promising great things for BC VQA wines in October 2006. Joe Zuppiger, Arrowleaf Cellars' proprietor noted at the time of their 4th vintage, “The harvest is going really well. The quantity is up – by 20% from '05, but the quality is also up.” Nirmal Gidda, proprietor for family owned Mount Boucherie Estate Winery, echoed Zuppiger's enthusiasm, “the harvest has been A1. The sugar levels are high, the Ph and acid levels are where we want them – the quality of the grapes is exceptional. If it keeps going the way it is we'll have a superb harvest.”

“The beautiful week and the warmth have been great, as the flavours invested in the grapes will now be coming through,” said Howard Soon, winemaker for Sandhill Wines. With harvest yields up, and crush just beginning, the wineries are crushing the grape varieties used to make white wines as sparkling wines were put to bed in September. Varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay have been crushed or were on the presses by late September 2006. Roger Wong, co-winemaker for Gray Monk Estate Wineries noted as he loaded 8 tons of Gewürztraminer onto their presses, “we haven't started the reds yet, we want to make sure the flavours are where we want them, rather than picking by numbers.”

With the end of the harvest, wineries showed their enthusiasm for the quality of the 2006 vintage. “The quality and the quantity of the 2006 crop were fantastic,” says George Heiss, proprietor Gray Monk Estate Winery in the northern Okanagan. “I've been doing this since 1972 and I consider 2006 to be one of the better years. With our whites the flavours are much more pronounced than both the 04 and 05 vintages,” Heiss added.

Kim Pullen, proprietor of Church & State Winery located on Vancouver Island agrees, “The 2006 whites are spectacular.” With vineyards in both the Okanagan and Vancouver Island Pullen noticed that the Island weather was good, although not as high-quality as the Okanagan. “We saw the rain a little earlier than we wanted to, but our Vancouver Island appellation Pinot Noir did well,” stated Pullen.

Like Vancouver Island, in the Similkameen Valley, “we had a little later start than the Okanagan because of the rain, so the quantity is relatively unchanged from 2004, but the quality of our crop is perfect,” stated Ann Heinecke, winemaker for Crowsnest Vineyards. Already bottled and ready to be shipped, “the whites are very good and have intense flavours, noted Heinecke.

There's something for everyone from the 2006 vintage as Senka Tennant, winemaker for Black Hills Winery on the Black Sage Bench in the Southern Okanagan, declared, “My personal view was this vintage was a red year. The late grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc really benefited from last year's growing season.” Tennant added, “my feeling was 2006 was the best Cab year we've ever had.”

The Icewine harvest was equally as exciting. An early dip in temperatures in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys in late November, kick-started the Icewine harvest in 2006 – one of the earliest on record. With wineries throughout the province completing their regular grape wine harvest, the late November cold front meant that winery employees headed back to the vineyards to pick the grapes left on the vine for their Icewine harvest.

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With temperatures reaching -12 degrees Celsius on November 27th in the Central Okanagan, St. Hubertus Estate Winery staff started picking early in the morning and had finished their entire Icewine harvest by nightfall - approximately 20 tons of Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc grapes. Due to the early harvest, with limited cluster dropping, and lack of bears, birds, deer and the elements to decrease crop yields, winemaker and proprietor Leo Gebert notes, "this is the biggest Icewine crop we've ever had."

Bruce Nicholson, international award-winning winemaker for Jackson Triggs, says his staff also started and finished picking their Icewine harvest of Riesling grapes on November 27th. With temperatures of -11.5 degrees in the South Okanagan, Nicholson notes, "the snow makes it a little more difficult for the pickers, but it doesn't affect the grapes at all." This is the earliest Icewine harvest he can remember, and "it's a bonus for us to get to pick in the daylight." With three new Icewine presses, Nicholson was very happy that 2006 yields were high.

Yields are the same as years previous for Blossom Winery noted winemaker John Chang, as they did lose some clusters to birds and deer in the Kaleden area in the Southern Interior. Chang was working with Blossom

Winery's Okanagan grape-growing suppliers as they picked Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Riesling varieties for their 2006 vintage. Chang has both red and white varieties of Icewine planned for their 2006 vintage sales.

Quail's Gate Estate Winery also started picking November 27th, using about 30 people to pick their harvest of 15 tons, finishing by 7:00 pm the same evening. Winemaker Grant Stanley noted, "This is the first time since 1989 that we got to pick our Icewine harvest during the day, and so close to the original harvest, so we were still in process mode. We have good yields, big sugars - everything you'd want in a fine Icewine."

Another cold snap in early January 2007 helped those wineries who had not yet completed their Icewine harvest a round two to finish what they had started. An estimated 150,000 litres of Icewine was produced this year, up from 86,500 litres the previous year.

The BC grape wine harvest overall was up 40% over the short crop year of 2005, and 22% over 2004, considered by vintners to be a more typical year. Mother Nature, new vineyards and new vines coming into production have helped grow BC's grape wine crop to over 20,000 tons annually.

