

# “EASILY THE WHITE WINE VINTAGE OF THE DECADE.”

◦ Mike Bartier, Winemaker, Road 13 Vineyards

## Vintage 2008

by David Scholefield

- With excerpts from the 2008 BCWI Winemakers & Viticulturalists' Forum and special thanks to Mike Bartier of Road 13 Vineyards for sharing his meticulous 2008 vintage report as well as his 11-year historical data.

✓ White wine quality:  
Excellent. “Easily the white wine vintage of the decade.”

✓ Red wine quality:  
Variable, but generally very good: wines have very fresh flavours (i.e. they are very ‘BC’).  
Some pinot noirs and syrahs outstanding.

✓ Icewine quality:  
Very good.

### Cool April = Late Bud Break

The Okanagan once again experienced a cold winter, with ‘bitterly cold’ temperatures in January. Spring was wetter and colder than normal, with an extraordinarily late occurrence of snow on April 19th, noted by Mike Raffan of Township 7 to be the latest since 1955. Because of the cool April conditions bud swelling was behind schedule, and consequently bud break was as much as 18 days later than normal. This was unexpectedly beneficial when potentially fatal frosts occurred in late April. The yet-to-emerge tender young buds were spared, but the end result was that the vines were very late getting their growing season started.

### Typical Spring Weather: Vines Spectacularly Catch Up

Once bud break finally occurred, weather patterns normalized. May was slightly cooler than normal, June slightly hotter than normal. Precipitation for both months was almost spot-on the historical averages. Clearly the growing conditions in May suited the vines, because flowering was much earlier than the late bud break suggested it would be. Flowering commenced the first week of June (Osoyoos), June 12 (Golden Mile), and June 18 (Kelowna) – just 4 days behind normal: a

remarkable demonstration of the ability of the vines to adapt and ‘reset the clock’.

### Slightly Cool Summer: Dry July, Wet August

A cursory glance at average daily temperatures for July and August (only very slightly below average for both months) would create the false impression that an extraordinary summer was ordinary. But if the summer of 2008 was distinguished by episodes of extreme weather (hail on July 9, a violent windstorm later in July, and the mother of all rainstorms on August 9), what mattered most to the vines was that generally the month of July provided ideal growing conditions: warm without being too hot, and most importantly, very dry. For vines in catch-up mode, the absence of extreme heat spikes was important, as there was no interruption of photosynthetic activity.

Aridity is always the key to great vintages (it is not insignificant that Bordeaux’s driest years in the 20th century were 89, 82, 61, 45, and 28). In July 2008, the Okanagan received only about 50% of normal precipitation. In the words of Mike Bartier, “...this is very significant to the development of all grapes, and makes a very real contribution to the resulting red wines. Cell division in the grapes happens in July and more water present during this time promotes greater cell division, which eventually translates into larger berries. Larger berries equal a high juice to skin ratio in the harvested grapes, which means lighter tannins and generally less concentration. So, a dry July is never bad from a winemaking perspective.”

While the July 9 hailstorm certainly caused localised damage (particularly in the Osoyoos region, according to Daniel Bontorin of Le Vieux Pin), Karen Gillis of Red Rooster observed that it occurred early enough that the berries were still hard, so that potential crop loss

## Vintage 2008 (cont.)

was minimal. Rod King, grapegrower for Sandhill Wines, has noted that ‘it gets windier every year’. But while the July windstorm was powerful enough to uproot huge trees in Penticton and make viticulturalists’ lives miserable in the short term, it did not have a lasting impact on the vines. More surprising was that a rainstorm of up to 60mm in a 24 hour period on August 9 and by far the wettest August ever recorded (85mm – average precipitation for August is 27.6mm!) had no impact on berry size.

### Harvest: Late Start, Brilliant Weather Throughout

September and October needed to come up with something special – and they did. According to Hagen Kruger of Wild Goose, “it was the most spectacular September on record – it saved us.” September and October were slightly cool, which slowed down ripening and delayed harvest. Both months were very dry and sunny. Clear skies brought cooler nights and warmer days, so that acid levels were preserved as the grapes developed mature flavours and softer tannins. With no problems with rain, it was an easy harvest. The unusual weather patterns created an unusual order of harvest. Pinot noir and many white varieties ripened later than normal, while syrah ripened much earlier than normal.

The Fraser Valley and the Islands once again were confronted with very wet and very cool conditions. The crop was small and achieving ripeness was a challenge. Quote of the Year honours go to Randy Picton of Nk’Mip, who describes the Icewine harvest as the “polar opposite” of 2007. Picking took place (in daylight, for once) on December 15.

### Overall

The total 2008 harvest was 22,200 tons, up slightly from 19,777 tons in 2007. The 2008 whites, especially aromatic varieties, are outstanding, heralded by winemakers as ‘excellent, stunning, fantastic.’ Clearly the cooler conditions were a benefit. The top reds include pinot noir (‘best ever’ according to Randy Picton) and syrah/shiraz, which typically present excellent acid balance and very pure meaty, peppery varietal characteristics.

As winegrowers everywhere jump on the cool climate bandwagon, proclaiming their wines to be lighter, fresher, and more elegant (when often they are anything but) we in British Columbia can take satisfaction in what nature has given us – wines that are a true reflection of their unique environment.



Photo: Suzanne Gebert