

VQA Grows Good Wine

By Lisa Harrison

*When European settlers arrived in Canada in the 1800s and tried to grow the wine grape varieties from their homelands, the *Vitis vinifera* plants often succumbed to disease and cold winters.*

In some regions of the country, hardy native species (e.g., *V. Labrusca*) produced peculiar, but drinkable wines. Eventually, the introduction of American hybrids and crosses such as Niagara, Duchess and Catawba improved the quality of wines, but it still fell short of European standards. Not much would change for several decades as Prohibition, government regulations and virtual monopolies left Canadian wine quality in limbo.

In the mid-1970s, Harry McWatters, founder of Sumac Ridge Estate Winery in BC's Okanagan Valley, and the founders of Inniskillin Wines in Ontario shook up the industry. They obtained licences to produce and sell wine and, by doing so, they created opportunities for others. Around the same time, experiments with techniques to grow tender *V. vinifera* varieties such as Chardonnay and Riesling were proving successful. Many farmers and orchardists converted to grape production. Unfortunately, the venture would be short-lived for many. The signing of the Canada/USA Free Trade Agreement in 1988, together with a ruling under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade meant that Canada had to abandon tariff protection for the wine industry. Some growers accepted

government compensation to rip out their vines following the 1988 harvest while others decided to persevere. As vast quantities of relatively inexpensive products flooded in, the remaining, dogged Canadian winemakers chose to differentiate their product.

With some support from the federal and provincial governments, many replanted with the classic grape varieties such as Chardonnay, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. To

Working on the harvest.



Photo: BC WINE INSTITUTE (winebc.com)

VQA history

assure consumers of quality, industry leaders in Ontario established the Vintners Quality Alliance in 1988. The BC VQA system was established in 1990. All wines bearing the designation VQA meet strict standards.


The primary set of standards relates to the quality of the grapes. The juice at harvest must contain a certain minimum natural sugar content; there are limits on the levels of chaptalization (the practice of adding sugar during fermentation); winemakers are prohibited from adding water at any stage in production, and the addition of sweet reserve wine is controlled. To meet these standards, great care is required in the vineyard. (Perfect weather doesn't hurt either.)

The VQA program also ensures that labels accurately represent the province, region, vineyard and estate of origin so consumers can be assured of quality. This is an important distinction. In British

Columbia, truckloads of bulk wine are imported from California, bottled, then labelled rather vaguely as "cellared in BC" These wines cannot be labelled as VQA.

Ontario and British Columbia are the only two provinces producing wines that meet VQA standards; however, pockets of production exist in more easterly microclimates. In Quebec, there are more than 30 small wineries tucked into the warmest regions near lakes and in protected valleys growing mainly non-*vinifera* grapes. In Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, there are approximately 325 acres in French hybrids with a small amount of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

VQA wines have generated enthusiasm for domestic wines, contributed to a flourishing tourism industry and earned a place for Canadian wines on the world stage.

For more information: www.winebc.com 

Okanagan Falls vineyard.

