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BC wine - getting it out there

Dave McIntyre, wine columnist for The Washington Post, went to British Columbia last year and files this report on how to export. His wife Leah took these photographs during their earlier visit there in 2018. These striking statues are in one of Mission Hill's vineyards.

New wine regions have trouble getting attention. Magazines, reference works and atlases have a finite number of pages, retail stores limited shelf space, restaurant lists and collectors' cellars favour the classics. Even the Internet, with its unlimited bandwidth, can be a difficult place to get a message through all the cacophony.

Newer regions struggle to establish themselves in the market alongside the benchmarks of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Napa and other better-known areas. They need to overcome market surprise ('They make wine there?') and scepticism ('I tasted one years ago, and they'll never make anything good') to boost sales beyond the winery door. They need to shout above the din to catch the attention of importers, distributors, retailers, sommeliers and, ultimately, consumers.

That's where the winemakers of the Okanagan Valley, in Canada's British Columbia, find themselves now. I visited the region last October, my second time in as many years, and came away impressed with the quality of the wines and the confidence of the vintners. And I found myself wishing I could buy their wines back home in Maryland.

The Okanagan Valley boasts more than 180 wineries, by far the majority of British Columbia's 280 licensed grape wineries. (Another 90 or so are licensed to produce wines from other fruits.) The vineyards were widely replanted to international *vinifera* varieties in the early 1990s in response to the North American Free Trade Act. The region enjoyed a boom in the first decade of this century as successful

entrepreneurs in Vancouver finance or Alberta's oil industry embarked on second careers. This stage of planting is mature now, and the Okanagan seems poised to move to the next level.

The Okanagan Valley has caught the attention of some high-profile consultant winemakers. Alain Sutre of Bordeaux works with Painted Rock, Poplar Grove and Culmina wineries. Chile's Pedro Parra consults at Haywire. And very recently Napa Valley's Philippe Melka signed on with Phantom Creek Estates, his first Canadian client.

The region is certainly well situated to take advantage of tourist traffic given the Okanagan's status as the favourite vacation spot for rain-weary Vancouverites. Mission Hill, Quail's Gate, Poplar Grove (which enjoys the view above) and 50th Parallel are among the several leading wineries boasting restaurants with sophisticated cuisine featuring local produce, notably meats and lake trout. Yet largely because of this easy home market – and Canada's demanding alcohol regulations – the region is largely unknown outside British Columbia.

'No one in the world knows the Okanagan', Tony Holler, owner of Poplar Grove winery in Penticton, says with as much frustration as exaggeration. Two years ago, Holler helped form a group of seven wineries called the Okanagan Wine Initiative, or OWI, to try to boost the region's reputation and market outside British Columbia. 'We thought as a group we could get the Okanagan out into the world of wine.'

The question is which markets to target. 'Should we expand to more emerging markets, or focus on a select few?', muses Darryl Brooker, president of the winery group led by Mission Hill. The consensus seems to be to focus on a few markets, both targeted and as opportunity arises.

London is a natural, of course, given its importance to wine as well as Canada's Commonwealth ties. BC wineries have participated in an annual 'Canada Calling' tasting of Canadian wines in London since that event was initiated in 2014. The group effort has paid off.

'If I go to London alone on a sales trip, it's not nearly as effective as if we go as a group', says Christine Coletta, co-owner of Okanagan Crush Pad and Haywire winery in Summerland. 'For 10% of my sales I have to rely on my fellow winemakers to work together.'

John Skinner, owner of Painted Rock winery, first presented his wines at ProWein in 2015 and has returned each year since, bringing his OWI colleagues along. 'Attendance there, and familiarity with our region, is growing dramatically', as a result, he says.

Sometimes opportunities turn into setbacks, however. OWI members have had reluctantly to cancel various foreign trips this year because of the spread of the coronavirus. Still, these targeted marketing efforts have started an international conversation about Okanagan wine, and the vintners clearly hope the world will join in.

'Okanagan has grown from being the cousin no one wanted to talk to, to the one everyone wants to take credit for', according to Skinner. He added that he's talking to a distributor in New York City, so maybe there's hope yet for us wine lovers in Maryland - though we will presumably have quite a wait.