

# OKANAGAN: CANADA'S GLOBAL WINE REGION

International wine experts are bringing their skills and knowledge to this part of British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province, joining with local talent young and old. In this fast-developing region, the progress being made is clear to see, says **Daniel Honan**

**H**ere in this marginal, cool to cold continental climate, vineyards are becoming recognised for their ability to produce world-class wines of outstanding quality, elegance and finesse. Situated at the edge of the wine-growing world, on the 49th

parallel north, the Okanagan Valley is a stunning landscape of ancient glacial lakes, ice dams and calderas enveloped by steep mountain ranges, sloped benches and hillsides composed of silty, sandy, gravelly and stony soils.

'We are creating something new. We are not following the path with centuries of history

**Painted Rock Estate vineyards at the northern end of picturesque lake Skaha**

behind us. We are forging a new path every single day,' says French viticultural consultant Alain Sutre. 'While we have a long history of wine on our shoulders in Europe, the Okanagan is more like a blank sheet of paper, where we can write a new history in a new land. It is a fantastic experience to be a part of something from the very beginning.'

## *Untapped potential*

Sutre has been coming to the Okanagan to try and understand the valley's potential for wine-growing since 1999. 'I was aware of the Canadian wine industry in Québec,' he says. 'I knew about ice wine but not much more.

'When I first came to the Okanagan in 1999, it was to develop a new wine project, Osoyoos Larose. I stayed in the valley for a week or so and tasted some wines. I remember thinking, "well, the wines aren't fantastic, but they might have the potential to be great someday".' Sutre now consults to a number of high-profile

Photograph: Kenton Gilcrest

'While we have a long history of wine on our shoulders in Europe, the Okanagan is more like a blank sheet of paper, where we can write a new history in a new land'

**Alain Sutre, Painted Rock Estate**

wineries within the Okanagan Valley, including Burrowing Owl, Culmina, Poplar Grove and Painted Rock.

'I've been working with Alain for almost 14 years now,' says John Skinner, owner of Painted Rock. 'On a tip-off from a nursery owner in Bordeaux, who I was buying some >



## ‘My job is to help producers find out what the signature of the Okanagan is, so they can start making great Okanagan wine’

Olivier Humbrecht MW (right)

clones from, Alain took it upon himself to visit us here in the Okanagan. We took a walk through our vineyard, and afterwards he said he could help us improve our wines, which he absolutely has.’

Skinner, a former investment banker, says he wants to be ‘better, not bigger’. So to raise Painted Rock’s capacity for quality and fulfil his ambitious wine-growing endeavours, Skinner knew he had to hire experts like Sutre.

‘There’s no doubt we have some good home-grown talent here in BC, but we’re still a young industry,’ says Skinner. ‘We don’t yet have the facility within our region to educate and grow that community of experts we need. So, a lot of us have had to reach out for international guidance.’

### Travelling winemakers

There are many stories of emerging wine regions importing human and intellectual capital from more established areas with greater experience in grape-growing and winemaking. In the latter half of the 1800s in Australia’s Hunter Valley, bounty immigrants from Germany were brought over to labour in the vineyards. A century later, Australia’s first flying winemakers brought their own expertise to many northern hemisphere wine regions.

Today the Okanagan Valley is benefiting from the knowledge and experience of viticultural and winemaking consultants from across the winemaking world, including Bordeaux’s Michel Rolland at Mission Hill Winery, and both Tuscany’s Alberto Antonini and Chile’s Pedro Parra at Okanagan Crush Pad.

‘When I first came to the Okanagan, I was struck by its beauty and the energy of the people and their pioneering spirit,’ says Olivier Humbrecht MW of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace, who works with one of the region’s newest wineries, Phantom Creek Estates.

‘When I started to taste the region’s wines, I knew there was potential for greatness here.’



Olivier Humbrecht MW



Humbrecht has been hired to help develop Phantom Creek’s vineyards and transition them over to an organic and biodynamic farming regime, working closely with Napa Valley viti/vini power-couple Anne and Cameron Vawter and New Zealand winemaker Francis Hutt.

‘Whenever you bring people like me or Francis over from another wine region, the challenge is in trying not to replicate the place

**Above: Alain Sutre, CEO of Ertus Group, consults to a number of Okanagan producers**



you’re from in the new place,’ explains Humbrecht. ‘The last thing I want Phantom Creek to do is copy other regions’ wines – to try and make a red Bordeaux or a Burgundian Pinot, or even try to make wine to a New Zealand style. My job is to help them find out what the signature of the Okanagan is, so they can start making great Okanagan wine, using grapes from the Okanagan and winemaking methods from the Okanagan, which are developed and proven over time.’

He adds: ‘Replication might be inevitable at the beginning – and we are at the beginning – but it should never be the ultimate goal.’

### Australasian influence

Having recently arrived from Carrick Wines in Central Otago, Hutt is eager to push the progression of the Okanagan Valley as an emerging, potentially world-class wine region. ‘It’s not really my style to come in and blaze away,’ says Hutt.

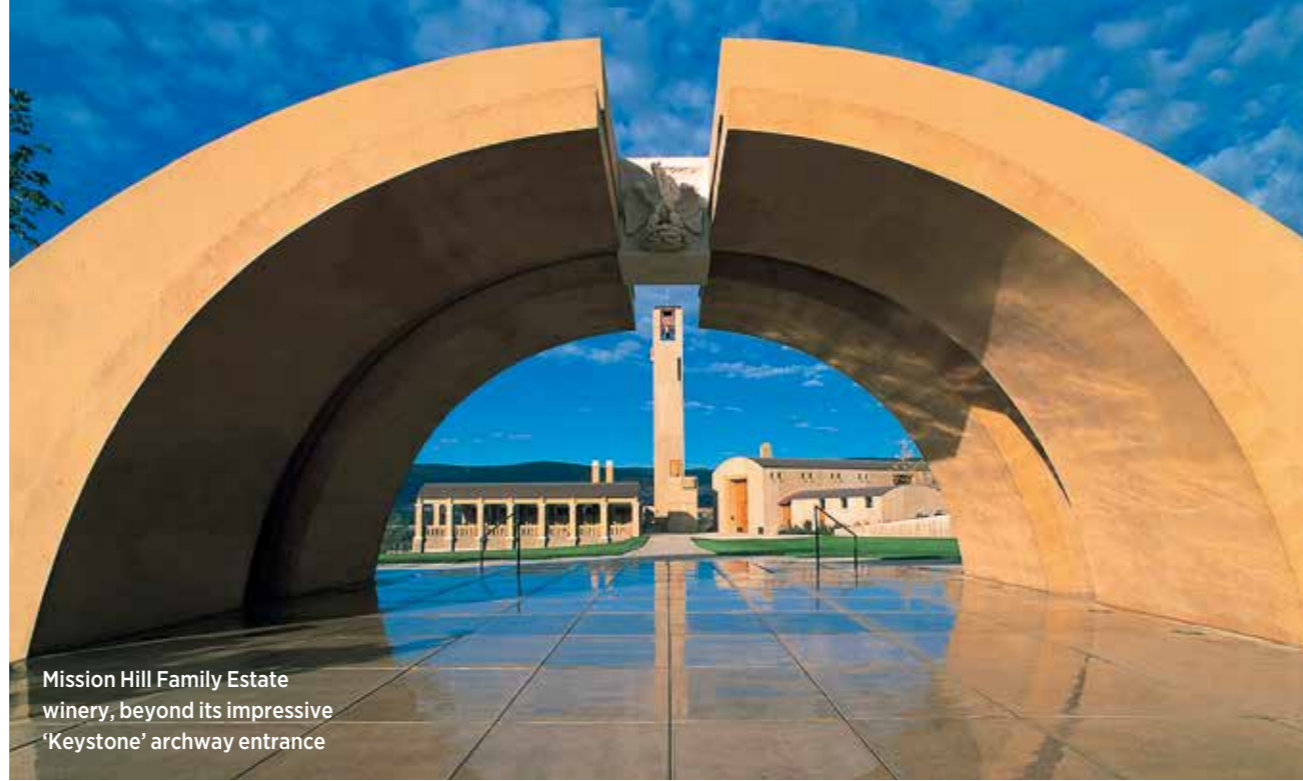
‘My role, first and foremost, is to make the best wines possible. And the way to do that is to collaborate with Olivier and everyone here in the Okanagan community. We need to combine our experiences and learn from each other and the environment. That’s how we make the best wines possible: together.’

## ‘We need to combine our experiences and learn from each other and the environment. That’s how we make the best wines possible: together’

Francis Hutt, Phantom Creek

Another expat forging a new winemaking life in the Okanagan is Australia-via-California winemaker Phil McGahan of Checkmate Winery, which specialises in premium examples of Chardonnay and Merlot. ‘One of the things that drew me [to the Okanagan] was that there were vineyards that were already quite established,’ says McGahan, ex-winemaker of Williams Selyem in California’s Russian River Valley. ‘At Checkmate, we have access to 20-year-old Merlot vines and 45-year-old Chardonnay vines, which are as old as anything I’ve ever worked with. These vines are hitting that phase where they’re >

**Above: Phantom Creek Estates, Black Sage Bench, south Okanagan**



Mission Hill Family Estate winery, beyond its impressive 'Keystone' archway entrance

“There’s a lot more focus on how to manage a vineyard according to what the terroir is trying to say”

Severine Pinte, Le Vieux Pin & La Stella (above)

starting to produce really interesting, complex wines which will help to shape and identify the Okanagan Valley as a place of unique wine,’ McGahan adds.

**Local knowledge**

At the southern end of the valley in the desert town of Osoyoos, right on the border with the USA, Carol and Dan Scott of Lariana Cellars have been growing grapes on a former summer campground – Shady Lagoon – for the past decade and crafting wines which, while popular with locals, remain mostly unknown outside BC, let alone Canada.

“There’s no doubt that experts from outside North America coming to the Okanagan – consulting, moving here and even starting their own wineries – has resulted in more international exposure for the valley and really elevated the overall quality of the wines being produced here over the past 10 years,” says Carol Scott. ‘But we mustn’t forget there are many local pioneers who’ve contributed greatly to the establishment of the Okanagan Valley today as a wine-growing region.’



Phil McGahan at Checkmate Winery

She cites Senka Tennant and Richard Cleave, who work for her, as two key names. Croatian-born Tennant moved to Canada aged 13 and has worked in the Okanagan for more than 20 years. She was winemaker and founder of Terravista Vineyards in Naramata as well as Black Hills Estate winery in Oliver, among others. Viticultural consultant Cleave is a 40-year veteran of Okanagan grape-growing who helped establish Burrowing Owl Estate and Phantom Creek in the mid 1990s, as well as Lariana Cellars in 2007.

Both have worked with Howard Soon, awarded the Order of Canada in 2019 for services to the BC wine industry. With 38 vintages under his belt at, among others,



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Calona/Andrew Peller, Sandhill, Red Rooster, Tinhorn Creek and now Vanessa Vineyards in the Similkameen Valley, he is Canada’s longest-serving winemaker.

Others include Robert Goltz and Harry McWatters who, until their respective deaths in 2019, were regularly sought out for their wealth of expertise with regard to soils, climate and knowledge of the right terroirs for specific varieties.

**BC’s door is open**

Languedoc-born Severine Pinte, winemaker for Le Vieux Pin and La Stella wineries, has seen just how much the valley has evolved in 25 years – from the early, enthusiastic rush to plant vines just about anywhere, to now thinking more deeply about site and varietal selection. ‘When I arrived in 1996, terroir was not really considered,’ Pinte says. ‘A few

wineries were dedicated to finding balance from their vines, but many more were content with just making wine – maybe adding a little bit of this or a little bit of that to fix up mistakes later.

‘There’s a shift now to identifying the best places to grow the best grapes, and a lot more focus on how to manage a vineyard according to what the terroir is trying to say.’

Pinte is quick to emphasise how positive this evolution has been, and echoes Alain Sutre’s sentiments regarding Europe’s long history with wine-growing – forging a new path instead of following a well-trodden one.

‘I’ve accomplished way more in 10 years in the Okanagan than I could ever have done in 10 years in France,’ she says. ‘We’re a very young wine region compared to the rest of the world, and the door is still wide open to new ideas and passionate people.’

**Worldly ambitions: five wines to try**

**Checkmate, Queen’s Advantage Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley 2015** 92

N/A UK [www.checkmatewinery.com](http://www.checkmatewinery.com)  
Planted in 1973 on Golden Mile Bench, these are BC’s oldest Chardonnay vines. Scented passion fruit and pineapple plus lemon curd. Bright, lemony acidity braces against the sweet fruit with some pie crust oak spice (from 16 months in oak) on the silky yet fleshy palate. Shows how good Okanagan Chardonnay can be – made by Australian-born winemaker Phil McGahan, formerly of Williams Selyem in Russian River. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alcohol** 14.4%

N/A UK [www.phantomcreekestates.com](http://www.phantomcreekestates.com)  
Phantom Creek is owned by Chinese businessman Richter Bai and now, since 2018, has Olivier Humbrecht MW of Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace on board as winemaking consultant, working with Napa viti/vini couple Anne and Cameron Vawter and New Zealand winemaker Francis Hutt. A powerful yet pretty Cabernet-dominant (38%) Bordeaux blend, with ripe black and blue berry fruit underpinned by bracing acidity. Sappy and subtle, with a satin mouthfeel, finessed tannins and a long, brooding finish. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

**Lariana Cellars, Cabernet Sauvignon, Okanagan Valley 2016** 92

N/A UK [www.larianacellars.com](http://www.larianacellars.com)  
Dan and Carol Scott learned their craft from some of Okanagan’s top wine-growing locals, viticulturist Richard Cleave and winemaking consultant Senka Tennant. This is 100% Cabernet, from vineyards on the western shore of Osoyoos Lake, and is full of tangy boysenberry, sweet cassis, cacao and charred red capsicum. The persistent palate shows focused acidity and a silky-smooth texture. Delicious, concentrated and complex. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

**Painted Rock, Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley 2018** 91

£48.50 (2017) *The Wine Treasury*  
Charming, elegant, bracing and bright, using fruit from the coolest part of Painted Rock’s vineyards by lake Skaha. French viticulturist Alain Sutre has consulted here since 2006. White peach and pear fruit, lemon curd, sweet almond blossom florals and a flinty note. The mouthfeel is generous – fleshy yet taut – with a real sense of finesse. 85% was aged six months in French oak, 37% new. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 14%

**Phantom Creek, Cuvée Phantom Creek Vineyard, Okanagan Valley 2016** 94



**Mission Hill Family Estate, Legacy Series Compendium, Okanagan Valley 2013** 91

N/A UK [www.missionhillwinery.com](http://www.missionhillwinery.com)  
Bordeaux wine consultant Michel Rolland has worked with Mission Hill since 2005, and in 2018 Australian Ben Bryant (formerly of Jacob’s Creek) joined as chief winemaker. Cabernet Sauvignon (44%) dominates this Bordeaux blend from estate vineyards in Osoyoos and Oliver, showcasing an intense core of briar fruits lifted by bay, thyme and pepper. Long ageing in new oak provides a firm frame with dry tannins. **Drink** 2020-2030 **Alc** 14.5%