Digging the dirt in British Columbia

The 250km stretch of western Canada’s key wine valleys of Okanagan and Similkameen offer winemakers enviable options in the myriad soil and grape types. Tina Gellie reports.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Canada’s ruggedly beautiful westernmost province of British Columbia (BC) has it in spades, whether you’re navigating Vancouver’s property bubble or the black runs of Whistler Blackcomb.

It’s also a vital consideration for grape growers and winemakers in the 250km-long stretch of the Okanagan Valley, from Vernon in the north to Osoyoos on the US border in the south, as well as the Similkameen Valley to the west of its southern tip.

Steep and undulating hillsides rise from both east and west banks of the adjoining Lakes Okanagan, Skaha and Vaseux, creating pockets of microclimates, plus myriad soil types – from sand and volcanic matter to ancient glacial till. Over 250km, the climate naturally varies: cooler and higher in elevation around Kelowna, Naramata, Summerland and Okanagan Falls; to hotter and drier at Oliver, Golden Mile Bench and Osoyoos.

While Okanagan opened its first winery in 1931, it took until 1984 for Similkameen. Here, vines are planted in arid, windy, desert-like conditions, surrounded by imposing mountains. It’s thanks to these factors that deter pests and diseases, that Similkameen is recognised as Canada’s organic farming capital, with 42% of all crops grown this way and an increasing move to biodynamics.

Site specifics

Okanagan Crush Pad in Summerland, which makes its own Haywire brand as well as wine for other vintners, sought advice from terroir expert Pedro Parra. On Switchback, its 4ha organic vineyard planted to Pinot Gris, Parra dug more than 30 pits to look at subsoils, now

Down the road is OCP’s new Garnet Hill Ranch, a 130ha block that had never been farmed, boasting Canada’s highest-elevation vineyard at 680m. Following Parra’s electroconductivity survey and more than 100 pits, 10ha of Pinot Noir was planted in 2012, with 5ha of Chardonnay and Riesling going in the ground this spring. The site was certified organic in 2016 and is farmed biodynamically.

Bordeaux consultant Alain Sutre has worked with several Okanagan wineries, believing the region’s wines will soon be as identifiable as those from Napa, Bordeaux or Burgundy. Like Parra, he digs pits to identify soil types and then replants the right variety and rootstock to the right soil, advocating sustainable and organic farming, as well as micro-irrigating and -harvesting in plots averaging just 0.4ha.

At Culmina in Oliver, owned by Don and Elaine Triggs, pioneers of Canada’s wine industry through their former venture Jackson-Triggs, Sutre’s work across their 22ha of vineyards planted on three benches has been eye-opening. Understanding the

Clockwise from above: spectacular views of Lake Okanagan from Quail’s Gate; from left, Matt Dumayne, Christine Caletta and Steve Lornie of Okanagan Crush Pad; Ian MacDonald of Liquidity Wines; Clos du Soleil in BC’s organic capital of Similkameen; Tinhorn Creek’s Gewürztraminer.

Several Switchback plots are vinified separately because of their different characters.

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30m difference in elevations, aspects and myraid soil types from chalky limestone to black coppery earth is the reason they can plant everything in this part of the valley, from the classic red Bordeaux grapes to Vigneron, Riesling and even Grüner Veltliner.

If we’re talking benches, the most famous in BC is Golden Mile Bench, the province’s first sub-region, granted in 2015. For six years Sandra Oldfield, CEO and president of Tinhorn Creek, sought for this terror to be recognised and, on 1 May, her winery will release its first bottling with the new designation – the Golden Mile Bench, Oldfield Series Chardonnay.

The bench is on the western side of the Okanagan Valley, south of Oliver and opposite Mile Bench. ‘It’s rocky as it is the Okanagan, south of Oliver and opposite Mile Bench, Oldfield Series Chardonnay. ’t’s rocky as it is the Okanagan, south of Oliver and opposite Mile Bench, Oldfield Series Chardonnay.

proposals to recognise such terroirs will be put forward this year. QUAIL’s Gate, Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley 2014 91

POSA Fairview

This popular Kelowna winery focuses on Burgundian varieties. A big-volume wine (9,000 cases), it is very well made, showing integrated oak, fresh green apple and mandarin fruit as well as spicy toast notes. Easy-drinking and elegant.

Drink 2017-2020 Alc 15%

Culmina, Unicus Grüner Veltliner, Okanagan Valley 2014 90

N/A UK www.culmina.ca

From the Wachau-like schistous soils of Margaret’s Bench at 600m comes this new line for Culmina, from 1ha of seven-year-old vines. Pink grapefruit, green apple and white pepper notes, on a juicy, grippy palate. Try the Decora Riesling and Hypothesis Bordeaux red blend too. Drink 2017-2018 Alc 14%

Orofino, Wild Ferment Syrah, Similkameen Valley 2014 93

N/A UK www orofinovineyards .com

This and the 2015 have sold out (100 cases each), but try the 2016 later this year. 100% Syrah from the Scout Vineyard, aged in concrete for five months, then bottled unfined. So pure and vibrant, showing real sense of place – juicy, minerally, meaty raspberries and violet try the Scout Vineyard, Syrah and Hendo Vineyard Rieslings.

Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14%

Meyer Family, McLean Creek Road Pinot Noir, Okanagan Valley 2012 94

Estate Red. Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13.8%

Painted Rock, Cabernet Franc, Okanagan Valley 2010 93

£30-£38.75 21Wines, Butler Wine, Ministry of Drinks, Mission Wines, Wine Treasury

A delicious, burstingly example of Cabernet Franc – the inaugural release – showing lively acidity allied to a dense, complex palate of mulberries, pomegranate, lead pencil and bay leaf. The tannins are inky and grippy, from 18 months in French oak (30% new). Try the Flagship Red Icon 2013. Drink 2017-2021 Alc 14.8%

For full details of UK stockists, see p177

he loses about 10% of wine a year: ‘It’s an expensive angel’s share – five cases of wine!’

Back in Oliver, Sévérine Pinte of Le Vieux Pin questions, ‘How can we define BC’s unique terroirs?’ she explains. ‘We can’t just start classifying things, we need to take time to learn what is different, and why.’ Canadians like to be very inclusive and not leave anyone out, but for proper sub-appellations this is necessary.

Tina Geldie is the associate editor of Decanter.

Tantalus, Old Vine Riesling, Okanagan Valley 2013 95

£45 (Quinn’s with POA)

From 1978-planted vines farmed sustainably. Taut and concentrated kumchaba tea, citrus and wet stones on a dry, textual palate. Zippy acidity and a long, saline finish. Vital, rich and fresh; one of Canada’s best whites.

Above: Tantalus in Kelowna has some of British Columbia’s oldest plantings of Riesling, from which it makes one of Canada’s best whites

‘I want you to taste life in my wines in 20 years time,’ says winemaker Dave Paterson. Drink 2017-2050 Alc 12%

Haywire (Okanagan Crush Pad), Free Form White Okanagan Valley 2014 92

£35 (Red Squirrel)

So many top wines from Matt Dumayne (and consultant Alberto Antonini), but this 100% Sauvignon Blanc is very exciting, made naturally in stainless steel with five months’ skin contact. Drink at room temperature to let the sweet hay, mango and guava shine on the textural, rich palate. Also try the Free Form and Canyonview Pinot Noirs and Switchback Wild Ferment Pinot Gris in amphora.

Drink 2017-2018 Alc 15.5%

Little Farm, Mulberry Tree Vineyard Riesling, Similkameen Valley 2014 92

N/A UK www.littlefarminery.ca

Just 115 cases made, with minimal intervention, by Rhys Pender MW and wife Alithan. The 2015 vintage is probably sold out too. Dry, limy and pure, with the valley’s distinctive raciness and acidity ticked off the grape. Drink 2017-2023 Alc 13.5%

To celebrate 150 years of dominion, Canada is the feature country of the Vancouver International Wine Festival, from 11-19 February. More than 180 wineries from 18 countries will attend, including 76 wineries from BC and eastern Canada. www.vanwinefest.ca

Gellie’s 10 picks from Okanagan and Similkameen

leaves and cranberry fruit, spice from the integrated French oak and kept fresh from 18% whole bunches. Also look out for the McLean Creek Rd Chardonnay and micro-cuvées.

Le Vieux Pin, Cuvee Violette, Okanagan Valley 2014 92

£30-£39 no de Force, The Good Wine Shop

Co-fermented with 1% Roussanne, this ripes, spicy, red-fruited Syrah is lifted and elegant in a Côté-Rôtie style. Classic violet, black pepper, boysenberry and moody pan juices on a silky, supple palate, with evident but integrated French oak.

Decisive! Drink 2017-2021 Alc 14.2%

Clos du Soleil, Signature, Similkameen Valley 2013 91

POSA Best Fairview

51% Merlot, 34% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Cabernet Franc and 2% each Malbec, Mourvedre and Verdot, aged 17 months in 100% French oak. Mouthfeel, with bramble fruit density, firm tannins and tobacco spice. Also try the Cab Sauvignon, beautiful, fragrant, chalky Est. Red. Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13.8%

Pinot Noir, Okanagan Valley 2014 92

VQA, Oldfield Series Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley 2014 91

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Drink 2017-2020 Alc 14.4%

Meyer Family, McLean Creek Road Pinot Noir, Okanagan Valley 2012 94

£34 Ministry of Drinks

Made by Chris Carson, this and the 2013 vintage are no strangers to Decanter praise. Dusty tannins and tart cherry

and cranberry fruit, spice from the integrated French oak and kept fresh from 18% whole bunches. Also look out for the McLean Creek Rd Chardonnay and micro-cuvées. Drink 2017-2020 Alc 15.3%