

Andrew Jefford

‘Wine helps places celebrate themselves and sing out their uniqueness’



Handsome city, Vancouver. The rivers, bays and creeks massage blue fingers into the urban fabric. Cars bead the bridges, sea-planes skim the bays and container ships slide off into the Pacific beneath a gallery of snow-dusted mountains. I made the city's acquaintance earlier this year, in the drenching late-winter rainy season. We didn't mind the weather: it was Wine Festival time. France was this year's toast, and my duties included two speeches and two tasting seminars, the second of which was a 'terroir tour' of France.

It occurred to me, as I was preparing for the Festival, that what we call terroir is the result of a long wine-creating conversation between human beings and the place in which they find themselves. The conversation is begun when a vineyard is first planted. It might not last long; it might not deepen beyond superficial pleasantries. If it does endure, it will (like any serious relationship) undergo crises, changes, about-turns – but after a century or two of interrogative labour and enduring drinker engagement, we can begin to sense the magnetic charge of the place in the wine.

I had the chance to explore some of British Columbia's wine regions – notably Vancouver Island itself and Okanagan Valley, and a brief look at Similkameen Valley. The Okanagan is the giant – 84% of the province's 4,250ha of vineyards – but this 180km section of a long, glacial valley running north to south really needs subdivision in its journey from sculpted Riesling to broad-shouldered Syrah and Cabernet. That's what it's getting: four sub-GIs (Geographical Indications) are being instituted, with two more in process.

Forget the details for now. What struck me was the astonishment of those initiating their conversation with their land – when they discover it expresses something new, something unprecedented. 'Everywhere,' Coulée de Serrant's Nicolas Joly said to me 20 years ago, 'the earth has a different face.' The cunning vine provides facial recognition

software – by turning those differences into scents and flavours. Osoyoos in the southern Okanagan and the Similkameen just over the mountain lie at the same latitude as much of Champagne, yet their degree day totals of 1,575 and 1,533 respectively make them warm, semi-desert regions capable of producing lavish red wines over a short but hot, luminous season. There is nowhere else on the surface of the earth quite like that, and local wine-growers are busy testing those conditions at different altitudes and in different soil types.

Meanwhile, the Cowichan Valley out west on Vancouver Island is halfway to Seattle; equivalent latitudes on the mainland would take us well into Washington State in the US. Warmer still? Quite the contrary – the degree day totals fall away to 1,103 in this genuinely oceanic environment, and suddenly we are talking to vineyards which want to produce sparkling wines and Burgundy varieties, and where very little makes it back to the winery before October after a long, cool and much less luminous season than in the Okanagan. Once again, there's nowhere quite like this.

I tasted as much as I was able to in both locations, good and bad alike. More varietal diversity would be beneficial. The quest for subtlety is in full swing, now we know how easy it is to deliver something sensational here. Neither region is immune to climate change challenges, with the Okanagan suffering from the smoke haze of mountain wildfires in recent vintages; those challenges inevitably trouble the conversation. High-status wine, though, helps places celebrate themselves and sing out their uniqueness; it helps the people of a place treasure their biotopes. In a world in which even those holding high office will foul environmental assets for short-term gain, we might almost see viticulture as a salvation crop. That, at any rate, was what was on my mind as I returned from handsome, heart-throb BC. **W**

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WHAT I'VE BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH

There are some great Pinot Noirs in British Columbia – but the white-wine cousins prosper here, too. **Clos du Soleil, Middle Bench Pinot Blanc 2018**, with its floral scents and pristine, stone-fresh flavours, was one of the best 'value' wines I tasted in the Okanagan. **Phantom Creek, Pinot Gris 2017**, meanwhile, made with consultative help from Olivier Humbrecht MW, was succulent, weighty and low-acid, with quince and marmalade flavours: a delicious contrast to the 'Grigio' style of most Okanagan Pinot Gris (the most widely planted white variety in the valley).

