

IWFS OSOYOOS, OLIVER, SIMILKAMEEN TOUR 2022

VANESSA VINEYARD, 1090 Hwy 3, Cawston. 250.899.8811

Owner: Suki Sekhon, John Welson.

Winemaker: Howard Soon, CM

The tasting room here is perched just above the highway, with the Similkameen Valley spread out below. The more important view is to the rear, where the rugged, rock-strewn 30-hectare (75-acre) vineyard climbs toward a mountain. This sun-drenched slope grows red varieties almost exclusively.

“Some people said we should plant some whites,” says Suki Sekhon, a partner in Vanessa with retired investment dealer John Welson. “We said we have chosen the best red site in Canada. Why would we plant whites? If we want to do that, we will just go buy another site.” Richard Cleave, their viticulture consultant, had recommended reds for what is one of the hottest sites in the Similkameen. They grow 10 hectares (25 acres) of Merlot, 8 hectares (20 acres) of Cabernet Sauvignon, 6 hectares (15 acres) of Cabernet Franc, 5.3 hectares (13 acres) of Syrah, and 0.4 hectare (1 acre) of Viognier (for blending with Syrah).

Howard Soon, who was then the winemaker at Peller-owned Sandhill Wines, added wines from Vanessa grapes to the Sandhill portfolio. When Howard retired in 2017 after 37 years with Sandhill and its predecessor wineries, he was snapped up by Vanessa. “I was never looking for a job, [but this is] a great property, a great terroir. Our goal is that we are going to make the best wine we can, in Canada or in the world.”

The winery is named for one of Suki’s daughters. Initially, the partners had considered calling it Stagecoach Winery because a stagecoach route once ran through the site. “But when I first went to the site, there were a lot of butterflies,” Suki says. Vanessa means ‘of love’ in Latin; Pandora’s daughter Phanessa was fascinated by butterflies.

Wine: Meritage, Right Bank, Viognier

OROFINO WINERY 2152 Barcelo Road, Cawston. 250.499.0068
Owner: John and Virginia Weber
Winemaker: John Weber

Credit goes to Orofino's John Weber for codifying sub-appellations in the Similkameen appellation. In 2018 he began naming on his wine labels regions where he gets grapes, including the Cawston Bench, the Keremeos Bench, and Olalla Gap. "Our tiny little valley, which is 24 kilometres long, has some fairly distinct growing areas," he says. "Consumers want to know about that."

This champion of the Similkameen, formerly a teacher, arrived in the valley in March 2001 from Saskatchewan with his wife, Virginia, a nurse. They took over a 1.8-hectare (4½-acre) vineyard near Cawston that had been planted in 1989. "We spent the first year on a huge learning curve," John remembers. Original thinkers, they used straw bales to build an energy-efficient winery and tasting room. Solar panels added in 2012 make Orofino largely energy self-sufficient.

John's unofficial sub-appellations extend the winery's practice of naming vineyards on the labels. Orofino, Hendsbee, and Passion Pit are all on the Cawston Bench, while the Scout Vineyard is on the South Cawston Bench. Comparative tastings of John's dry Rieslings from Hendsbee and Scout show the distinct flavours from terroirs just a few kilometres apart. The Hendsbee, John says, is "linear," while the Scout Riesling is "more friendly."

Orofino produces its wines entirely from Similkameen grapes. The winery started by owning 3.6 hectares (9 acres) of vineyards, and John was contracting with owners to farm another 8 hectares (20 acres). The included the Passion Pit Vineyard, a one-time lovers' tryst where the former owner planted a hectare (2½ acres) of Cabernet Sauvignon for Orofino in 2007. In 2018, Orofino bought the entire 4.2-hectare (10½-acre) property with plans to expand the plantings.

Wines: Rieslings, Muscat, Beleza, Pinot Gris

KLIPPERS ORGANIC ACRES 625 Mackenzie Road, Cawston. 250.499.0852

ROW 14 AT KLIPPERS 725 Mackenzie Road, Cawston. 250.499.0758

Klippers Organics was founded in 2001 with the goal of providing healthy, high-quality produce to families across British Columbia. We farm in a sustainable manner, striving to give back to the earth rather than depleting it. Located in Cawston BC, we sell our produce at Vancouver Farmers Markets each week and to restaurants across the Lower Mainland.

Row Fourteen is surrounded by fertile farmland and rows upon rows of apples, pears, and soft tree-fruits. Through inventive meals, with the land, the farmers, and the kitchen working together, every guest has the opportunity to enjoy everything from farm to table.

After 17 years of farming in Cawston, and enjoying making our own cider, we decided to start a new project- create a cidery! In early 2019, we received our license to start production, and Untangled Craft Cider was born. We embrace field to table and a tree to tap philosophy. We use our own fruit, grown sustainably, to create the unique and natural craft ciders.

We are often asked "*How did you come up with the name, Untangled Craft Cider?*" It all started when we took over an apple orchard in 2006. The orchard was owned by an engineer who thought it would be a great idea to create a 4 acre apple tree arbour. He did not prune, and instead he weaved the branches together from tree to tree and row to row, and soon the branches started to graft together and become one huge tree. While we thought it was a beautiful site, it was not practical to produce and harvest fruit in this way. When we took over the orchard, the first thing we did was untangle the trees. Hence the name, Untangled!

Ciders: Newton, Blue Pear, Tangled, etc

CLOS DU SOLEIL 2568 Upper Bench Road, Keremeos. 250.499.2831
Owners: Spencer Massie, Michael Clark, Bonnie Henry, and others.
Winemaker: Michael Clark

Michael Clark, the winemaker and managing director at Clos du Soleil, is a self-described worrier. “I consider it a strength,” he says, chuckling. However, the Bordeaux-inspired wines at Clos du Soleil are so well done that he actually has nothing to worry about.

The winery was launched in 2008 by four business couples led by Spencer Massie, a former naval officer who had developed a good palate both in his ship’s mess and during various shore assignments near wine regions. Michael, who was born in Ontario in 1972, joined the partnership in 2012 following a wine passion nurtured since his youth. “I read *Champagne Is for Breakfast* when I was probably 10 years old,” he says, referring to George Bain’s classic Canadian wine book published in 1972. “I don’t know other children who loved to read wine books.”

Initially Michael pursued a career as an investment banker; he began formal studies in winemaking in 2010 and worked at Swiss and Bordeaux wineries. On returning to Canada, he completed the rigorous University of California programme online while identifying Clos du Soleil as the winery where he could make his mark in British Columbia. “Winemaking is such a blend of science and art,” he says. “That is what draws most people to it, including myself.”

Clos du Soleil is focused on red and white wines from Bordeaux varieties. The initial 4-hectare (10-acre) vineyard was planted in 2007. In 2017 and 2018, the winery acquired neighbouring parcels. The property Les Collines (because of its hilly terrain) was planted with 2.2 hectares (5½ acres) of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon, and the 4-hectare (10-acre) La Côte property has 2.9 hectares (7¼ acres) of mature vines, notably Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

“My philosophy is that our best wines demonstrate their quality in ways other than bigness or heaviness,” he says. “A great wine has elegance and complexity, not huge, chewy fruit or aggressive tannins; to me, delicacy matters.

Wines: Signature, Estate Reserve Red and White, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc

CORCELETTES ESTATE WINERY 2582 Upper Bench Road, Keremeos.
250.499.5595

Owner: Charlie and Jesce Baessler

Winemaker: Charlie Baessler

Urs and Barbara Baessler had a family farm near Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland called Domaine de Corcelettes. The name followed them when they moved to a Similkameen Valley garlic farm in 2007 and planted vines in 2010. “The goal always was to have some grapes,” Urs says.

The vineyard propelled their son, Charlie, into winemaking. Born in 1985, he took a job in the vineyard and cellar at Herder Winery and Vineyards and moved to the Burrowing Owl winery, where he became a vineyard manager and learned winemaking under the tutelage of Bertus Albertyn. In 2013, the Baesslers opened their own winery on their 1-hectare (2½-acre) vineyard near Cawston, which grew just three white varieties.

Even with purchased grapes, the original Corcelettes could not support two families. Charlie and Jesce, his Nunavut-born wife, also worked at other Similkameen wineries, while Urs became a long-distance truck driver. Then Herder Winery, where Charlie had his start, came on the market in 2013 (the result of a divorce). The vineyard was larger and planted primarily with red varieties, and the winery was well equipped. Friend Gordon Peters and his wife, Diane, partnered with the Baesslers to take over Herder early in 2015, now rebranded as Corcelettes with a vineyard expanded to 8.5 hectares (21 acres).

The Corcelettes portfolio now supports the two Baessler families with five white wines and ten reds. Jesce says that Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah are the “three cheerleaders” in the uniquely sunbathed vineyard. The vines grow in mineral-rich soils bordered by a steep south-facing rocky hillside. Located halfway up the hill, the winery and the tasting room command a dramatic panorama over the Similkameen Valley.

Wines: Menhir, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Chasselas (one of about 4 properties in BC)

CULMINA FAMILY ESTATE WINERY 4790 Wild Rose Street, Oliver.
250.498.0789

Owner: In 2019 Don, Elaine, and Sara Triggs sold to Arterra Wines Canada - (owned by the Ontario Teacher's Pension Plan); it was previously owned by Constellation Brands, and Vincor before that. The vineyard was part of Domaine Combret a long time ago.

Winemaker: Jean-Marc Enixon

The winery name is simply explained: it was the culmination of a career in wine for Donald and Elaine Triggs and their daughter, Sara. At an age when most are retired, the parents created one of the South Okanagan's top vineyards and winery.

Donald began his career in 1972 with the winery arm of John Labatt. In 1989, when Labatt sold its wineries, Donald led the team buying them and co-founded the Jackson-Triggs winery, which became Vincor in 2006. A year later, he and Elaine began developing 22.7 hectares (56 acres) of densely planted vines on three mountainside benches on the Golden Mile.

They tapped the expertise of Alain Sutre (Osoyoos Larose), and in 1999 Pascal Madevon, the initial Osoyoos Larose winemaker, joined Culmina for several vintages. He was succeeded by another French-trained winemaker, Jean-Marc Enixon. It is hardly surprising there are Bordelaise fingerprints all over Hypothesis, Culmina's flagship red blend.

The three vineyard benches, each with differing soils and elevations, provide winemaking options; each row of vines is intensely monitored. Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Cabernet Sauvignon make up the largest blocks, followed by Chardonnay, Riesling, Syrah, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. There is also 1 hectare (2½ acres) of Grüner Veltliner, the Austrian white.

Wines: Hypothesis, Riesling, Gruner Veltliner

LE VIEUX PIN WINERY 5496 Black Sage Road, Oliver 250.498.8388

Owner: Sean and Saeedeh Salem

Winemaker: Severine Pinte

A sister winery to Italian-focussed LaStella, LVP concentrates on the Rhone varieties. The winery is said to resemble a small French railroad station with its drooping overhang of a roof, shading the walls from the blistering Okanagan sun, and the name was inspired by the old pine tree on the nearby ridge overlooking the town of Oliver. The owners had underestimated how well the wines would be received. A 2017 addition at Le Vieux Pin, blending elegantly with the original winery design, more than doubled capacity.

French-trained winemaker Severine Pinte (2010), produces the signature Syrah wines and white Rhône varieties such as Viognier, Roussanne, and Marsanne. And each of the three Syrah wines differs from one another, reflecting both the vineyard sources and Severine's winemaking.

The top of the Syrah pyramid is the sophisticated and age-worthy Équinoxe Syrah. "Equinox means equal day, equal night," Severine says. "When I describe the wine, I tell people I am trying—and I insist on the verb *trying*—to reach perfection. Trying to bring into that one cuvée all the faces of the Syrah and to marry the components in a harmonious way around a long spinal cord of tannin that will let the wine stand on its own."

During its initial years, Le Vieux Pin produced exceptional Pinot Noirs. That varietal was dropped after the winery's Syrah vineyards came into their own. Ironically, Severine was headhunted by another winery that specialized in Pinot Noir. "I would prefer to keep on making Syrah," she says. "I just love the aromas of Syrah and the way it evolves. And I like my wines to be a little bit structured. It is only possible because of all the work we do in the vineyard, making sure every plant is balanced."

Wines: everything, including Vaila, a pink wine.

BARTIER BROS. WINERY 4821 Ryegrass Road, Oliver 250.487.9667

Owner: Michael and Don Bartier

Winemaker: Michael Bartier

The wine-industry verity that “it’s all about the dirt” is nowhere more obvious than at Bartier Bros. The winery’s 6 hectare Cerqueira Vineyard produces wines with complex flavours with a spine of minerality. The vineyard is on the Black Sage Bench’s gravel bar where the last glacier, as it was retreating 10,000 years ago, laid down a calcium-rich layer of gravel. The vineyard was planted in the early to mid-2000s with Sémillon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah. It began selling fruit to Township 7 when Michael Bartier was the winemaker there. “I loved the grapes and coveted the property,” Michael says. When the Cerqueira family’s contract with Township 7 ended, the brothers bought the vineyard.

Born in the Okanagan Valley, Donald in 1958 and Michael in 1967, the sons of an accountant, both initially pursued careers outside of the valley. Don, an Alberta oil-industry executive, planted a small Gewürztraminer vineyard at Summerland in 2010. Michael, after getting a degree in recreational administration and working five years with a Victoria wine agency, returned to the Okanagan to start his winemaking career at Hawthorne Mountain Vineyards in 1995. Over the next two decades, he made wine at Township 7, Road 13, and Okanagan Crush Pad, as well as providing consulting work with other wineries. The brothers began selling their wines in 2011 and established their winery and tasting room after buying the coveted Cerqueira Vineyard in 2015.

The vineyard’s mineral content makes it singular. “All our rocks are crusted white [with calcium], and the small feeder roots from the vines are ‘hugging’ those rocks,” Michael says. “Every vintage, the wines are fresh, fruity, and minerally . . . That limestone ends up in every glass of our wine.”

Wines: Semillon, Rieslings, The Goal (red blend), GSM, Gewurz

MOON CURSER VINEYARDS 3628 Hwy 3 East, Osoyoos 250.495.5161

Owners; Beata and Chris Tolley

Winemaker: Chris Tolley

Moon Curser Vineyards offers perhaps the most varietally diverse portfolio of any Okanagan winery. Chris Tolley's wine list includes Arneis, Dolcetto, Tannat, Tempranillo, Touriga Nacional, Carménère, and Nebbiolo. "I love the diversity," Chris says. "I love the affirmation that this valley is capable of doing a wide variety of wines. Maybe we do one of these varieties better than anywhere else in the world." Indeed, he would put up a Moon Curser Tannat against wines from Uruguay where that variety thrives. The flagship red at Moon Curser, Dead of Night, is an inspired blend of equal parts Tannat and Syrah.

Chris, who was born in 1966 in Montreal, is a former software engineer; Beata, his Polish-born wife, practised as a chartered accountant. "We were looking for something more, something better, and we decided to do a winery and vineyard," Chris says. They went to New Zealand in 2003 for postgraduate degrees in enology and viticulture at Lincoln University, and the following year, bought an Osoyoos orchard where they planted their first vineyard and built the winery.

Chris and Beata concluded their winery was more likely to stand out if they did not merely echo what others were doing. Moon Curser also offers Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, and other Bordeaux varieties. A 4-hectare (10-acre) vineyard planted in west Osoyoos in 2018 grows Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and more Syrah.

In 2010, they decided that the winery's original name, Twisted Tree, was too bland and rebranded as Moon Curser. "Moon Curser is a synonym for a smuggler," Beata explains. "The whole idea is that the wine is all about the place. We picked Osoyoos for the sunshine and the heat. We wanted something that talked about the location, but we did not want to do it in the traditional way. There is a history of gold smuggling that took place here during the gold rush of the 1800s. The smugglers would curse at the moon because the border agents would catch them"—in its light. The labels echo this story: Dead of Night features a fox and an owl with a lantern.

Wines: everything ! These are big wines; the reds need ageing for years....

RAINMAKER WINES 4576 Black Sage Road, Oliver 250.880.0882

Owner: Kim Pullen

Winemaker: John Pullen

Rainmaker Wines is the passion project of Kim Pullen. After 17 years working in and around the wine industry, he is focussing to produce the best wines BC has to offer. With grapes cultivated on the Black Sage Bench and the Rattlesnake Vineyard of the Golden Mile, the wines reflect the unique terroirs of the Okanagan.

Pullen has gone from Church & State winery (35,000 cases) to Second Chapter (5,000 cases on the Golden Mile Bench just below Tinhorn) in 2017 and now Rainmaker Wines (5,000 cases) in 2021. As the newest kid on the Black Sage block, Rainmaker officially opened its doors in May 2021.

“We had dinner table discussions for years; do we sell, do we keep going?” says Pullen’s daughter Christina. “I think it was just time for him. To put it in its simplest form he was just ready to start something new,” she says.

All the production facilities are located onsite including a crush pad, fermentation and filtering facilities, and ageing barrels with unique racks and storage. At Rainmaker the focus is “incredibly hands-on and about handcrafting the wines. We take a lot of care to handpick everything and sort and there’s a lot of quality control so that we can make sure it’s the best.”

With a few new vineyard acquisitions, the two wineries now draw from about 10 hectares. The Syrah is a flagship wine, but the real pleasure is tasting Viognier from both Rattlesnake and Black Sage vineyards - they are quite different. The Syrah-Viognier “Modernist” is a surprising 25% Viognier.

Wines: Viogniers, Roussanne, Sparkling

PHANTOM CREEK ESTATES 4315 Black Sage Road, Oliver 250.498.8367

Owner: Richter Bai General Manager: Bill Lui

Winemaker: Mark Berringer; Consultant: Olivier Humbrecht MW

Perched high amid vines of the Black Sage Bench, the architecturally stunning Phantom Creek Estates became one of the Okanagan's finest destination wineries the day it opened in the spring of 2020. Richter Bai, the Chinese-born owner, is said to have invested \$100 million in the project. "My goal is to produce outstanding wine in Canada," he has said. Formerly a successful mining owner in China, he started in 2014 by retaining wine educator James Cluer MW; they spent much of 2015 visiting top wineries in France and California until Mr. Bai understood how to achieve his goal.

In 2016, Mr Bai bought two of the best vineyards on the Black Sage Bench. The Becker Vineyard was planted in 1993 (Harry McWatters). The nearby Phantom Creek Vineyard (originally 1993 by Dick Cleave) was expanded a few years later to total about 26 hectares (65 acres). Subsequently, Mr. Bai added more prime vineyard property on Black Sage, on the Golden Mile, and in the Similkameen Valley. And he recruited Alsace winemaker Olivier Humbrecht MW to lead Phantom Creek's transition to organic and, in time, biodynamic grape growing.

McWatters, the previous vineyard owner, had started to build a substantial cellar on Becker before selling the property. The new design more than doubled Harry's cellar, adding several tasting rooms and a restaurant with breathtaking views of South Okanagan vineyards.

In 2016, Phantom Creek's first vintage, the team made about 6,000 cases of wine, working in a well-equipped temporary winery as construction progressed on the showpiece winery. Karen Grosstessner-Hain, a specialist in Riesling and Pinot Gris, has been the winemaker since 2016.

Wines: Riesling, Pinot gris, red blends

CHECKMATE ARTISANAL WINERY 4799 Wild Rose street, Oliver
250.707.2299

Owner: Mark Anthony Wines and Spirits (Anthony von Mandl)

Winemaker: Phil McGahan

In 1994, Mission Hill Family Estate won a major award at a London wine competition for a 1992 Chardonnay, what the winery later described as “the best Chardonnay in the world.” (Personal story here). In 2012, he bought the vineyard and transformed it, and a neighbouring property, into CheckMate Artisanal Winery, the producer of some of the world’s best Chardonnays, along with equally fine Merlots.

The site has an unquestioned Chardonnay heritage. The original winery here was Domaine Combret; it was the first Okanagan winery to win a gold medal at the Chardonnay du Monde competition in France. After it closed, Anthony acquired it part of it and installed an intellectual Australian winemaker, Phil McGahan, to create CheckMate. His career took him to the Williams Selyem winery in Sonoma in 2010 and to CheckMate two years later.

McGahan sources grapes from select blocks in the various vineyards Mission Hill’s farming company owns throughout the Okanagan. (The checkerboard appearance of the vineyard blocks inspired the winery’s name and the chess terms for the wines.) The object is to make wines that express individual terroirs. “These wines are all a little bit different,” he says. “That is the challenge of making them. These are quite unique from each other.”

His winemaking is elegantly simple. The Chardonnay grapes, for example, are picked at night and are pressed while still cool and fresh. Individual blocks are fermented separately with wild yeast and aged about 18 months in French oak before being bottled. The Merlot, also fermented with wild yeast, is aged about 21 months in French oak, much of it new. Both wines are aged at least a year in bottle before release.

Wines: everything. Routine scores in mid-to-high 90’s, some 100 points.
Expensive...