

Tasting Report: 10 Year Old Okanagan Tasting

Following is a summary of the two tastings conducted by Wine Plus+ on November 30th and December 7th. This was a benchmark tasting of Okanagan wines with a dozen wines at each tasting and all at least a decade old.

It was with curious interest that the idea for these tastings emerged. Through negligent cellar management by myself and friends, I have had the opportunity to try a number of decade old Okanagan wines over recent years. Curiously, they all tasted remarkably better than I had expected. At the same time it occurred to me that there is little benchmarking for how well Okanagan wines age. The time seemed right to organize a tasting to bring clarity to this topic.

So digging into my own cellar and calling on friends and contacts at some of the 30 odd wineries that existed 10 years ago, an exciting range of wines was unearthed. The list of wines for each tasting is shown below.

November 30th Kelowna

1. Sumac Ridge, Sparkling Brut - Blanc de Noirs, 1997 (12.0%)
2. Hainle, Riesling, 1997 (12.1%)
3. Wild Goose, Riesling, 1996 (10.0%)
4. Gray Monk, Riesling, Bertram Creek Vineyards, 1987 (10.0%)
5. Mission Hill, Chardonnay, Grand Reserve, 1992 (12.5%)
6. Quails' Gate, Chardonnay, Family Reserve, 1994 (13.5%)
7. Kettle Valley, Cabernet Merlot, 1995 (13.6%)
8. Sumac Ridge, Meritage, Black Sage Vineyard, 1998 (13.0%)
9. Mission Hill, Oculus, 1998 (13.0%)
10. Poplar Grove, Legacy, 1998 (14.1%)
11. La Frenz, Cabernet Sauvignon, 1997 (13.4%)
12. Burrowing Owl, Cabernet Sauvignon, 1998 (13.5%)

December 7th Penticton

1. Lake Breeze, Zephyr Brut, 1997 (11.5%)
2. Hainle, Riesling, 1997 (12.1%)
3. Wild Goose, Riesling, 1995 (12.7%)
4. Gray Monk, Riesling, Bertram Creek Vineyards, 1987 (10.0%)
5. Mission Hill, Chardonnay, Grand Reserve, 1992 (12.5%)
6. Quails' Gate, Chardonnay, Family Reserve, 1994 (13.5%)
7. Pinot Noir, Summerhill, Platinum Series, 1998 (13.2%)
8. Fairview, Cabernet Franc, 1998 (12.8%)
9. Kettle Valley, Cabernet Merlot, 1995 (13.6%)
10. Mission Hill, Oculus, 1997 (13.0%)
11. Poplar Grove, Legacy, 1998 (14.1%)
12. Burrowing Owl, Cabernet Sauvignon, 1998 (13.5%)

I have to admit that I thought some of these wines would be absolutely dead. I by no means expected such an overall accomplished performance. Fellow panelists were Mike Bartier - winemaker at Road 13 Vineyards (Kelowna & Penticton tastings), Mark Filatow – chef & sommelier at Waterfront Wines (Kelowna) and Kenji Hodgson – wine writer & winemaker at Joie (Penticton). The panelists, as well as the nearly 40 guests at the tastings, were all surprised with the quality after more than a decade of maturation.

Two important things should be mentioned. 1) Bottle variation from one tasting to the next was distinct, proving the old adage that there are not good old wines just good old bottles. 2) You have to appreciate the flavours of mature wine to grasp the subtleties and nuances that wine can gain with age.

Below is a brief discussion of the findings by grape variety.

SPARKLING:

Both bubbly we tasted were young beyond their 11 years. The Sumac Ridge was incredibly toasty, the bread, brioche and yeasty flavours and aromas enhanced by the extended maturation. It can last for another decade easily. The Lake Breeze Zephyr was a much crisper, fresher wine with obviously shorter lees contact but still clean, fresh and zippy and also still youthful in appearance and taste.

RIESLING:

Riesling is famed for its longevity and we really stretched the limits with a 21 year-old version from Gray Monk. We had a mixed bag in terms of Riesling styles with different levels of alcohol, acidity, sweetness and maybe even the influence of botrytis in some wines. The Hainle wine, true to its' style, was incredibly high in acid but remarkably fresh yet complex at the same time (the second bottle was more oxidized and less enjoyable). The Wild Goose wines showed much softer characteristics, still some sweetness and still plenty of life. The 1987 Gray Monk had fantastic complexity. While quite developed, it still had a long finish and showed developed fruit and spice. Overall, BC Riesling should age well but the styles vary too much to make any solid conclusions.

CHARDONNAY:

The quality of the two Chardonnays after 16 and 14 years respectively is an amazing testament to the BC terroir. Only Burgundy has proven any ability to create Chardonnay that is still drinkable after this length of time, but this level of quality shows a unique capacity of BC's terroir. Most of the world's Chardonnay has completely fallen apart after 5 or so years. This longevity shows an exciting future for complex, matured BC Chardonnay. But one should note the alcohol content of just 12.5% on the Mission Hill Chardonnay, something you never see today. Are we going to be missing something with today's 14.5% alcohol wines when we open them in a few years?

PINOT NOIR:

The second tasting was to include Pinot Noir, but a Quails' Gate Family Reserve 1998 was scratched late due to cork taint. Tasted a few weeks previously this wine was holding up well and showing the potential for longevity in Pinot Noir. The Summerhill wine showed fantastic complexity on the nose with classic aged earth, spice, orange zest and still some fruits, however the palate had gone a little flat.

CABERNET & MERLOT:

A number of wines were included combining these two varieties and virtually all showed good potential for ageing. Many of the wines had developed remarkable elegance and complexity and the developed notes of burlap, tobacco and spice were just starting to emerge to compliment the red and dark fruits that were still evident. It appears that many of these wines will peak between 10-14 years but a few particularly concentrated wines should last 20 years. The Burrowing Owl 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon was practically a baby showing no signs yet of ageing in colour, aroma or flavour. These wines show clear potential for cellaring.

SUMMARY:

This was a fascinating exercise. The quality of the wines was excellent and I hope will get some consumers to look at BC wine differently – as something cellar worthy and age worthy. To my estimate, little of the wine produced in BC is cellared longer than a few years. The wines being produced at the quality levels of today have serious ageing ability and I believe this can add an exciting new dimension to what our wineries are producing. It is time to start buying BC wine by the case rather than just the bottle.

Thanks to the wineries Sumac Ridge, Wild Goose, Gray Monk, Mission Hill, Quails' Gate, Kettle Valley, Poplar Grove, Lake Breeze, La Frenze and Burrowing Owl for releasing precious wines from the library for this tasting.