

QUALITY ASSURANCE BASED ON SENSORY EVALUATION

A SUCCESS STORY - THE CANADIAN VINTNER QUALITY ALLIANCE (VQA) PROGRAM A CASE STUDY

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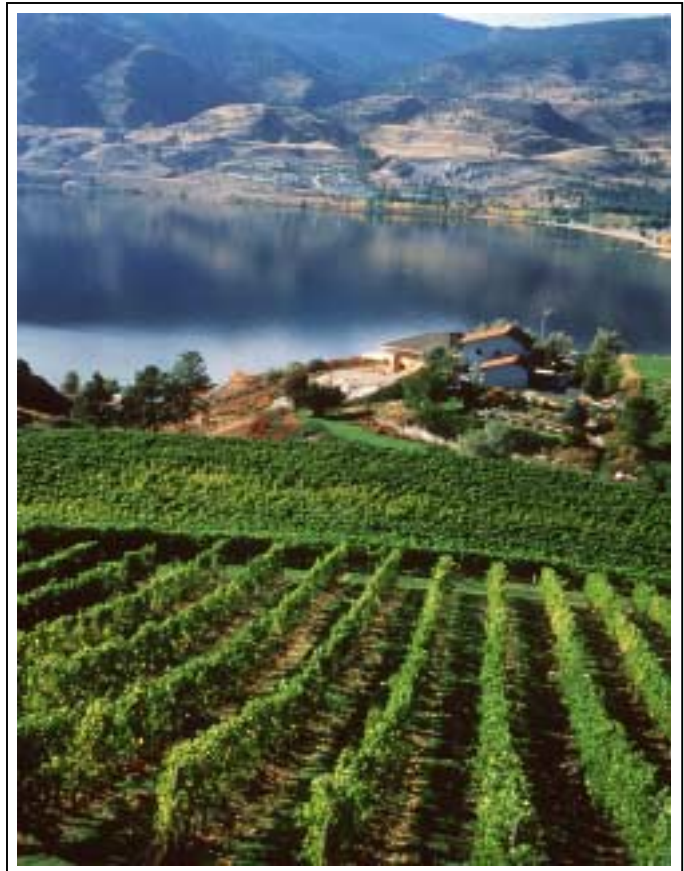
The British Columbia (BC) wine industry was established in 1860, when Father Pandosy planted vines at the Oblate Mission. The major varieties were Campbell, Concord, Diamond, Patricia, Bath, and Delaware. These Labrusca varieties were of North American origin and produced wine with strong Concord-like or 'foxy' character. By the 1950, French hybrids such as Okanagan Riesling, DeChaunac, Marechal Foch, Verdelet, Rougeon, Chelois and Baco Noir replaced the traditional labrusca cultivars. These cultivars were disease resistant and winter hardy and formed the basis of the BC wine industry for the next 20 to 25 years.

Most of the wines produced during this time were consumed domestically and were not considered of international quality. National and overseas sales were difficult. However, interest grew in the European cultivars, *Vitis vinifera*, which produced higher quality wines but were believed unsuitable for BC winters. However extensive research in the

1980's demonstrated that these cultivars could be successfully grown in the Okanagan Valley.

Between 1960 and 1980, the success of the BC wine industry was partially due to a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Prices and quality standards were set by the BC Grape Marketing Board, and BC wines had a substantially lower markup (50%) compared to imported wines. Thus, local wines very affordable to the consumer and there was no incentive for growers or wineries to achieve international quality.

All this changed in 1988 with the establishment of the "North American Free Trade Agreement" (NAFTA). The agreement changed the environment for BC growers and wineries and meant that wineries could no longer compete in the bulk wine market, due to high production costs.



The industry realized that without significant change they would not survive. The industry realized they had to focus on QUALITY and produce premium wines. A government replant program, added in the conversion of vineyards from French hybrids to *Vitis vinifera* cultivars. However, not all growers replanted, and plantings fell from 3,000 to 1,000 acres.

In 1990, the BC Wine Institute (BCWI) was formed. It was responsible for the administered the production, marketing, research and quality assurance needs for the industry. In 1991, the BC Wine Standards were legislated through the BC Wine Act (Bill 58-1990). This act gave the BCWI the responsibility and authority for establishing grape, wine making and labeling practices and standards.

The BCWI conceptualized the need for a quality assurance program - the Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA). It was modeled after other quality control programs: the AOC in France, the DOC in Italy, the QMP in Germany and the WINE LAWS in the United States. The BCWI finances this program through growers and wineries levies based on annual production.

The VQA consists of 1) a taste panel, 2) laboratory analysis, and 3) packaging review. Wines must be approved by a tasting panel and must be free of defects and true to varietal character before they can bear the VQA medallion. Wines with the VQA medallion, must be produced from 100% BC grown grapes and be manufactured in accordance with the National Standard for Wine 177.1-96 .

Wines labeled as 'estate bottled' must be produced from grapes grown by the winery. Wines bearing the name of a designated viticultural area (DVA) must be made with at least 85% of grapes grown in that area. Wines bearing a varietal name must have at least 85% of the named variety. Vintage wines must contain 95% of their content from that year.

VQA is jointly facilitated by the BC Wine Institute and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. It is held at the Pacific Agri-Food Research Center in Summerland. Applications for VQA status are sent to the BCWI. The application includes a signed affidavit from the winemaker that the wine is made in accordance with the BC Wine Standards.

VQA taste panels are held once a month consisting of from 40 to 100 wines. Three bottles of each wine are submitted; two bottles are used for evaluation and the third bottle is inventoried for future reference.

Each wine is identified by variety and vintage and is assigned a 3-digit random number. Judges evaluate each wine individually. Wines must be



VQA Tasting Facility,
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Summerland, BC.

defect free and true to varietal character to be accepted for VQA. If three or more judges reject a wine, the second bottle is opened and the wine is reevaluated.

A winery may submit a ‘tank sample’ or a ‘ready-to-bottle’ sample in order to obtain preliminary approval. Once approved, the ‘tank sample’ is stored at 0 °C for up to 90 days, for comparison with the final ‘bottled sample’. If the ‘bottled sample’, with preliminary approval, is rejected it is re-coded and tasted blind against the ‘tank sample’. If the ‘bottled sample’ has equal or better quality than the ‘tank sample’ it will pass VQA.

A wine must be accepted by a majority of the judges in order to receive VQA certification. After the wine is evaluated a summary sheet is compiled. This serves as feedback to the wineries.

Currently, there are over 25 certified VQA judges. Each panel consists of six judges. If there are more than 40 wines, two panels are required for the evaluation. Each judge is trained and has passed a defect recognition test with a score of at least 80% and has participated in a scorecard orientation. Judges are expected to attend monthly training workshops on various topics.

VQA has changed the face of the Canadian Wine Industry. In a 10-year period, the number of wineries has increased from 17 to 53, the number of acres has increased from 1476 to 4200, the number of liters has increased from 650,000 to 2,420,000 and the value of the product has increased from \$5 to \$49 million dollars. During this time, the dollar value has increased at a faster rate than production, reflecting an increase in quality for BC wines.

During this same period, the industry has moved from Germanic-style (Riesling, Gewurztraminer) to French-style (Chardonnay, Pinot blanc) wines and increased the plantings of red cultivars. BC wines have received a substantial number of international awards, and this number is growing every year. Thanks to the Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) program, consumers now have a greater level of confidence in the quality of Canadian wine.

