

THE WESTBANK EXPRESS

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The Beginnings of Westbank's Wine Industry

By: Ty Sorensen

Viticulture in the Okanagan began with the first European settlers in the region. Following the Catholic missionary Father Pandosy's arrival to the Okanagan in 1859, crops including grape vines were established. The grapes grown at the mission were processed to become sacramental wine consumed for religious purposes. Although the missionary proved that it was possible to produce wine in the region, the practice was slow to spread. While there were individual families who grew and produced grapes for their own consumption, it was not until the 1920s that they were grown in the Okanagan for commercial purposes. JW Hughes was the first to enter this industry and originally planted grapes in Kelowna for table consumption. However, after seeing the opportunity for increased profits, Hughes began selling and shipping grapes in bulk to B.C.'s first licenced winery, Growers Wine Company based out of Victoria.



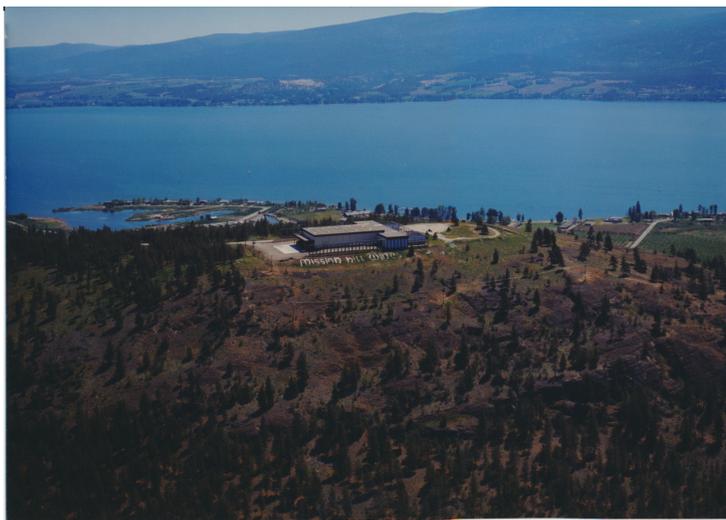
JW Hughes packing grapes 1926. Photo courtesy of Okanagan Wine and Orchard Museum



Calona Wines Advertisement, 1960s.

Hughes was not the only one to see the financial opportunity wine could provide, and Cap Capozzi and W.A.C. Bennett formed the Kelowna based company Domestic Wines and By-Product with the goal of producing wine from apples. Their company began by creating a wine from fruit that would have otherwise gone to waste and fortified it with hard liquor. The company was rebranded to Calona Wines in 1936 and eventually began producing wine made from grapes, becoming the first winery in the Okanagan to do so.

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Aerial Photo of Mission Hill mid 1960s.

It took several more decades for commercial viticulture to take root in Westbank and it was not until the 1960s that grapes were grown for commercial purposes. Quail's Gate founder Dick Stewart was the first to plant them beginning in 1961 and the Slamka family of Little Straw started their first vineyard in 1969. Westbank's Mission Hill and Mt Boucherie wineries were also established during this period with Mission Hill opening in 1966 and Mt. Boucherie's operations commencing in 1968.

After it became apparent in the late 1980's that a trade deal with the United States would be signed, Okanagan wine producers and the provincial government began to worry that inexpensive, higher quality American wine would flood the market and eliminate the demand for B.C. wine. . For this reason, the provincial government began paying growers to rip up hybrid varieties of wine and replace them with the superior vinifera varieties. In 1990, the B.C. VQA quality standard was implemented to ensure certified wines met standards with respect to their vintage, origin, and varieties.

While these initiatives vastly increased the quality of B.C. wine substantially, it remained obscure internationally. This all changed after Mission Hill Winery became the first B.C. winery to win an international award, claiming the title of "Best Chardonnay" at the 1994 International Wine and Spirit Competition. The achievement increased the recognition of the potential of the Okanagan to produce world class wine and increased the confidence of local growers.

Westbank's wine industry has continued to expand since with Little Straw opening in 1996, Mount Boucherie in 2001, Rollingdale in 2004, Kalala in 2006, Beaumont in 2007, Volcanic Hills in 2010, The Hatch, Ciao Bella and Off the Grid in 2015, Indigenous World Winery in 2016, Frind in 2019 and most recently Black Swift in 2020.



Quail's Gate Vineyards along Boucherie Road overlooking Green Bay, mid 1960s.

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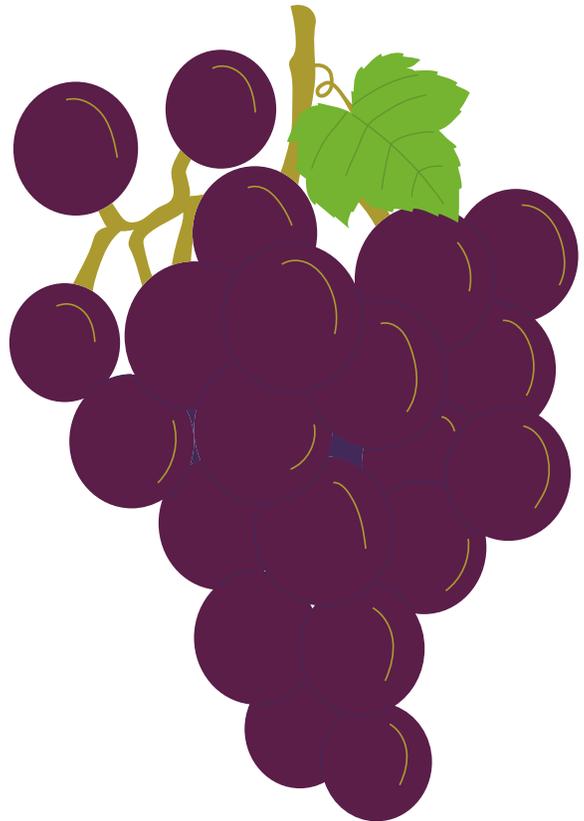


Harvesting grapes at Quail's Gate, circa 1970s.

Since its inception, the B.C. wine industry has been crucial to the economic development of the Okanagan region where it continues to have an enormous positive impact on the valley's communities. This is demonstrated by \$2.8 billion annual contribution to the provincial economy and the 12,000 full time jobs it provides. Additionally, B.C. wineries have 1 million visitors each year, drawing tourists from all over the world

A special thanks to our local wineries and Linda From the Kelowna Museum Society for proving the information that made this article possible

While these wineries grow and source their grapes from the entire Okanagan valley, they have found great success with both white and red varieties in their Westbank vineyards. Quail's Gate, Little Straw, Beaumont, Kalala and Ciao Bella have traditionally had success with the white varieties such as Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc, Gewürztraminer and Riesling. Red varieties such as Pinot Noir, Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc, Gamay Noir and Zweigelt have been also been popular in the Westbank vineyards of Quails' gate, Beaumont, Kalala and Ciao Bella. Despite most growers initially preferring varieties, there has been an increase in the planting of red varieties and wineries such as Quail's gate have begun to transition older blocks from white to red grapes.



If you would like to learn more about the history of wine in Westbank, check out the Westbank Museum's social media for our #SommelierSaturdays posts

RECIPE RELIC

Currant and Raisin Cake



Ingredients:

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|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1/4 cup shortening | 1 1/2 cups of milk |
| 3/4 cup sugar | 2 1/2 teaspoons baking powder |
| 2 eggs | 1 1/2 cups flour |
| 1/4 cup milk | 1/4 cup rasins and currents |

Directions::

Heat Oven to 350F. Mix shortening and sugar gradually then add milk and egg. Shift dry ingredients together then slowly add to liquids. Grease pan then pour ingredients slowly. Bake until cooked

This recipe was taken directly from the Handbook of Practical Cookery Cook Book, created for Home economic classes in 1939 .

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