



Sun sets on Quails' Gate Estate Vineyard in Kelowna, B.C.

QUAILS' GATE PHOTO

North America. Quails' Gate began in 1989, just after the free-trade agreement between Canada and the United States was signed and the vine-pullout program was running its course. Stewart's father, Richard, purchased the beautiful property on the west side of Okanagan Lake more than three decades prior. Here, some of the province's earliest European grape varieties were planted, though that was by acci-

BY ANDY PERDUE

It must be difficult for Ben Stewart to imagine a winemaker without an accent. That's because just about every one he's hired has come from Down Under.

"To start with, there are not many winemakers in Canada (who have a formal education)," said the owner of Quails' Gate Estate Winery in Kelowna. "One of the things you have to do is look to areas that have successes."

So when Stewart needed a winemaker in the early '90s, he looked outside the province. It so happened that Jeff Martin was touring Canada and met up with Stewart. The Aussie had 14 years in the business, and they struck a deal.

"Winemakers from Down Under are very independent," Stewart said. "They don't perceive any real barriers."

That was important in the early '90s in British Columbia, just a few years after grape growers pulled out most of their vineyards to replant with European varieties. The Okanagan was an unknown, and most figured B.C. was too far north to produce quality wine.

Together, Stewart and Martin helped to prove that theory wrong. And since Martin worked out so well for Quails' Gate, when he left in '99 to start his own winery, Stewart hired Peter Draper, another Aussie. Tragically, Draper passed away from heart failure in his first year. So Stewart found Ashley Hooper, another Australian, who crafted Quails' Gate's award-winning wines through the 2003 harvest before he returned home.

Today, Grant Stanley is the winery's new winemaker. He's actually a Canadian — but he trained and worked in the New Zealand wine industry before returning to

Canada. In 1961, Chasselas (a Swiss variety) was inadvertently planted. The family tried to plant Lemberger after tasting wines made by Washington's Kiona Vineyards Winery, but the wrong plants were bought, so the family settled on Pinot Noir instead. That was serendipitous, as one of B.C.'s finest Pinot Noirs comes from Quails' Gate.

The winery started with 4,500 cases its first vintage, and that has grown to 40,000 cases today, 70 percent of which is from 135 acres of estate vineyards near Kelowna in the north and Osoyoos near the U.S. border. The winery crafts 23 different bottlings from eight varieties, including such unusual grapes as Maréchal Foch, Optima and Chasselas. Last year, Quails' Gate won no fewer than 35 regional, national and international competition medals, including six golds for six different wines.

Stewart wants more than just wines for visitors to enjoy, so he opened the Old Vines Patio restaurant in 1999 and recently hired Judith Knight as chef. "She's a real gem," Stewart said of Knight, who once was actor Kevin Costner's private chef. "She has a real understanding of flavors and has a great style."

Stewart plans to expand the restaurant to 65 seats and build an inn on the lake with perhaps 15-20 rooms.

"We're fortunate to have the natural beauty of the lake and mountains," Stewart said. "We're a destination within Canada, and we're really lucky to be here."

Quails' Gate Estate Winery, 3303 Boucherie Road, Kelowna, B.C. 250-769-4451, www.quailsgate.com.

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