

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Canada's National Newspaper

TRAVEL

Native grapes

North America's first Aboriginal owned and operated winery in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley produces some great wines

by D. Grant Black



What happens when an aboriginal band in B.C.'s

southern Okanagan Valley takes the ancient tradition of Old World wine making and makes it their own? A little bit of regional economic development and lots of award-winning wines.

Nk'Mip (pronounced in-ka-meep) Cellars is not only the first aboriginal-owned and operated vintner in the Okanagan's grape-growing region, it's the first in Canada, in North America and possibly even the world.

This joint venture between the Osoyoos Indian Band and Vincor International – Jackson-Triggs and Inniskillin wines are two of their brands – opened in August 2002 near Osoyoos, B.C., 2.5 hours south of Kelowna.

If you're heading to the Okanagan for your annual wine tour this summer, you might want to add this unique First Nations winery to your itinerary.



The Osoyoos Indian Band (Nk'Mip in the Okanagan language), which formed in 1877, is a member of the Okanagan Nation. The Band's reserve inhabits some of the last large tracts of desert land left in Canada where approximately 370 members now live. Their early years included ranching, trading and small farms; now the people of the Osoyoos Indian Band have become known for growing quality grapes – and quality wines.



In 1968, 93 hectares were first planted and Nk'Mip now cultivates roughly 460 hectares of grape varieties annually in the south Okanagan's sandy, desert soil: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Ehrenfelser, Riesling, Gamay Noir and

Sauvignon Blanc. Nk'Mip's viticulturalist plants new varieties each year to meet current market demands.

“Last year we planted just under nine acres of Shiraz,” says winery manager Donna Faigaux, “and it'll be about a third leaf before we can harvest them.” Even in a desert climate, good things take time. “But we have them in the ground now, which is half the battle,” she adds.

The band leases out a portion of their vineyards and can still grow up to 800 hectares of grapes for their biggest customer – and now business partner – Vincor International. These vineyards sprawl across only a small section of the Band's 13,000 hectare reserve lands, yet they still total 25 percent of the total grape acreage planted in the Okanagan Valley.

The Okanagan region of south-central British Columbia enjoys long, hot summers and short, mild winters with minimum rainfall, perfect conditions for grapes, especially red varieties.

In only four years of production, Nk'Mip's wines have already received several awards and accolades. The Chardonnay from their first bottling year in 2000 won them the Silver Medal at both the Okanagan Wine Festival and Northwest Wine Summit in 2002 while the Merlot

and Pinot Noir received Bronze Awards at the same wine festivals.



The most recent accolade is Nk'Mip Cellar's 2002 Qwam Qwmt Chardonnay; this Reserve wine won the Gold Medal in 2003 at the Okanagan Wine Festival back in October. Not bad for an Okanagan upstart vintner.

Nk'Mip Cellars produces only wines with the VQA (Vintners Quality Alliance) seal. These products have been certified by an independent panel of wine experts and this is the wine consumer's assurance that the content grapes are 100% British Columbia grown.

Julianna Hayes writes a wine column for two Okanagan daily newspapers and a broadcast version for CBC Radio One's bureau in B.C.'s southern interior.

“One of the things about Nk’Mip’s particular parcel of land is that it doesn’t grow anything else. Grapes love this soil. They love this heat. Grapes don’t like to have wet feet. But it’s deadly for orchards or any other kind of crop,” explains Hayes. “Nk’Mip really has the dream parcel of land to most of the wineries in B.C., especially for those red grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot that can be difficult to get ripe.”

Hayes also says Nk’Mip’s price point is very attractive for a VQA wine buyer. Although the wines are crafted at a premium level of quality, most Nk’Mip VQA selections are priced at a reasonable \$14 to \$18 and the Reserve wines are in the \$25 range. 200 cases of ice wine were bottled in January and a 375 millilitre-sized serving sells for only \$60.

Penticton, B.C. architect Robert Mackenzie designed the 1672 sq. m. Nk’Mip Cellars winery; Mackenzie has designed four other British Columbia wineries. The winery now has the capacity to produce 15,000 cases or 135,000 litres annually in this modern facility.

Tours of the Nk’Mip winery run daily from May to October, three-times per day, and salmon and wild game barbeques with aboriginal entertainers are held on August weekends.

Nk'Mip's label design for their wine bottles not only reflects the premium nature of their wines, but attempts to educate wine drinkers on the Osoyoos Indian Band's history and traditions as well.

Chief Clarence Louie, who replaced his cousin, former Osoyoos Band Chief Louie Louie in 1985, now sees a new market for Nk'Mip wines. "We're trying to be the only Native winery in the Americas," he says.

Winery manager Donna Faigaux recently visited a Native-owned casino in Seattle to sell them on the benefits of tribe-to-tribe commerce.

"We're trying to branch off into the casino tribes because lots of the casino tribes have high-end restaurants and high-end events," says Chief Louie. "There are hundreds of casinos in the States, but we only want to be in the high-end ones," adds Louie who recently received the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the category of business and community development.



The winery is the second phase of a \$25 million Nk'Mip project that has seen the development of the winery, an all-season RV park with 80 hook-ups and the nine-hole Nk'Mip Canyon Desert Golf Course.

A newly constructed desert interpretive and heritage centre has been built across from the

winery and future development will eventually see a hotel and conference hall on the Band's land that adjoins the town of Osoyoos and fronts onto Osoyoos Lake.



Nature isn't being overlooked amongst all this recent development. While producing quality wines, the Band is also exploring ways to protect the remaining Nk'Mip Desert and its threatened species in southern B.C.'s wild sage countryside. A program to restore habitat and reintroduce species at risk is presently on-going.

Visitors can follow trails that lead from the

centre, then wander the sage desert into a forest grove where a traditional *tule mat teepee*, an underground pit house and a sweat hut have been recreated. Sections of the trail system features interpretive signs that describe plant life, terrain and the history of the Okanagan people.

If you go

Want to get an early jump on the winery touring season? The Spring Wine Festival runs April 29 to May 2 where you can choose from over 50 events up and down the Okanagan Valley. The Spring Wine Festival focuses on the Culinary Arts with exclusive chefs' cooking competitions, gala restaurant and wine pairings, consumer tastings, plus the innovative Tour de Vine cycling event.
owfs.com/festivals/spring_festival

Getting there: Air Canada's Jazz and Westjet fly daily into Kelowna. It's a 2.5 hour drive south to Osoyoos.

Your Designated Driver: Brenda Dell at Desert Country Wine Tours in Osoyoos from May to October sunnyosoyoos.com/webs/wine/tours.htm
(250) 498-7316

Wine sampling: Nk'Mip winery tours operate

from May 1 to October 31. They run for one hour each at 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. and cost \$5.

Where to stay: Accommodations in Osoyoos can be found at www.sunnyosoyoos.com. Nk'Mip Cellars provides 80 RV hook-ups for the highly mobile set.

Where to eat: A Friday evening dinner that features game meats and a traditional salmon barbeque with aboriginal entertainers will be staged on Saturday evenings in August at the Nk'Mip winery. Several Osoyoos restaurants can be found at sunnyosoyoos.com

Contact information: Nk'Mip Cellars 1400 Rancher Creek Road, Osoyoos, B.C. (250) 495-2985, nkmipcellars.com

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