

BUILDING A LEGACY

One vintage at a time.

by Jim Tobler

Anthony von Mandl always had a grand vision for the Okanagan Valley. To put it simply, that was to make the entire Valley a wine region that could stand on the international stage, a destination for wine and food lovers, in addition to all the other natural beauty and leisure activities that are on offer. It began, though, with Mission Hill Winery, a wine distribution company, and a whole lot of planning and determination. And the two latest additions to what is now the von Mandl Family Estates confirm that this has all paid off, in spades.

CheckMate Artisanal winery, near Oliver, and Martin's Lane Winery, right next door to Cedar Creek in Kelowna, are by any standard stellar wine producers, each with their own unique mandate. For CheckMate, and winemaker Phil McGahan, it is exclusively chardonnay and merlot. At Martin's Lane, for winemaker Shane Munn, it is exclusively Riesling and pinot

noir. Each winemaker has the best grapes to be found on the extensive von Mandl Estates vineyard holdings, often taking only a few rows from a particular vineyard, in a quest to make top-notch wines that are unique and wholly expressive of the vineyard terroirs they grow in.

Production is not, nor will it ever be, large at either winery. Says Munn, "we could make an extraordinary cuvee of a few thousand cases, I suppose. But that's not what we want. A few hundred cases each of highly specific terroir-driven wines is what we are doing. You can sense the differences between each of the wines, and that is what is so fascinating." Martin's Lane is completely gravity-fed, "not a single pump in the whole place," says Munn. Which is perfect, since his winemaking is non-interventionist. "I think of winemaking more as a guidance process, rather than intervention."



Nicolas Lehoux - Martin's Lane Winery

The splendid winery, named after von Mandl's father, is designed by world-renowned architect Tom Kundig, who also did Mission Hill. It blends seamlessly into its environment. A fantastic bronze cast of the head of Vincent van Gogh, by Douglas Coupland, greets any visitors coming up to the parking lot. There are aesthetic details at every turn, and some grand statements too, such as the amazing spiral staircase, which leads upon the main floor tasting rooms and working labs. Thematic references to the landscape surrounding it, even including subtle acknowledgements of the great fires of 2003, abound in this marvellous place. And the wines!

Both varieties are taken from four vineyard sites, each made into a single vineyard bottling. Simes Vineyard, named after the seminal first winemaker for Mission Hill, the great John Simes, and Dehart vineyards are in Kelowna. Fritzi's vineyard, named for von Mandl's mother, is in West Kelowna, on the Mission Hill Estate. The fourth is Naramata Bench vineyard, in Naramata. Thus, eight wines, four each of the two varieties. A tasting reveals profound differences in the wines, each doing exactly what Munn predicts them to do: show the terroirs they are grown in. While they may be some passing similarities to German riesling, particularly Mosel wines, and to certain parts of the Cotes de Nuit in Burgundy, these are unmistakably New

World wines, but with a refinement, structure, and generosity that is almost startling. Delicious.

Established a couple of years earlier than Martin's Lane, CheckMate Artisanal Winery is located just outside Oliver, but takes its grapes from several different vineyard sites, some estate vines, but also from sites as far south as the southernmost tip of Osoyoos, right at the 49th Parallel. McGahan makes five chardonnays, all named for aspect of chess: Attack; Queen Taken; Little Pawn; Knight's Challenge; Fool's Mate; and Capture. If you were pressed to make any comparison to another wine region, it would have to be Burgundy, simply for the structured, highly textured fruit and the overall restraint and elegance. But the newer iterations of chardonnay coming from the higher elevations in California could be mentioned in the same breath as well. Still, these are uniquely expressive of the soils they were grown in. McGahan, like Munn, takes a non-interventionist approach. "We do as little as possible, from the wild ferments all the way to bottling." The chardonnays came out in 2013; merlot arrived a year later: End Game; Silent Bishop; Opening Gambit; and Blsck Rook. Everything, and we mean everything, is done by hand. Not only the harvest, but all canopy management, leaf pulling, cluster thinning, is by hand. McGahan is highly particular about all



Checkmate Artisanal Winery

these things, since the wines he makes at the end of the day actually show the effects of all that care. Both the chardonnay and merlot wines come from a variety of vineyards, mostly in the central valley for chardonnay, and trending south for the merlot.

Tom Kundig designed an pop-up tasting room, while the actual, new winery is well under construction.

For both wineries, bottles are exclusively available by online purchase, or in person at the winery. Much of the 2014 vintage is already fully allocated, and demand is only going to increase. The price points are quite exclusive as well, ranging from \$80 to \$125 for the chardonnays, while all four merlots come in at \$85. After tasting them, though, you might be tempted to think this is a bargain.

So, why would Anthony von Mandl build two splendid, aesthetic masterpiece wineries, dedicate only the top resources

and talent, and not plan to make enough wine for any potential retail sales? A hint is in the private reception and dining room at Martin's Lane, where there is a min-library of wine on one wall. The wines, beerenauslese from Dr. Loosen, Auslese from JJ Prum, several bottlings of Bugundy's pinnacle, Domaine Romanee-Conti, are the very best of the best. They are there to illustrate a simple point, one that von Mandl has held to from way back in 1981, when he began in earnest to make great wine; there is no glass ceiling for quality in the Okanagan.

At the launch of Checkmate, which was held at Vacluse restaurant in New York City, he told the assembled guests that "We are a small region, of course. But given the different micro-climates, the range of soils the glaciers left us with 50 million years ago, and the desire to make the best wines we can, the Okanagan will be known the world over as one of the greatest wine regions you can ever visit."

Now that is some kind of legacy, and it is unfolding as reality, with each passing vintage.



Nicolas Lehoux - Martin's Lane Winery