

Wine Review with Daenna Van Mulligen

October 30th, 2020

For the past several years, there has been a lot of curiosity about what's going on on Oliver's Black Sage Bench.

Nearly 30 years ago, the area unexpectedly became synonymous with Bordeaux varieties and has since given birth to some of the most iconic wines in the Okanagan Valley.

When businessman Richter Bai began purchasing highly regarded vineyards in the area in 2016, people grew even more inquisitive.

The project, named after the [Phantom Creek](#) Vineyard, which was established by local viticulturalist guru Richard Cleve, was part of Bai's purchase, and included the older Becker Vineyard (formerly Harry McWatters' Sundial Vineyard).

On several trips to the area it seemed to me nothing was progressing from the outside. The mountain of soil, and remnants of McWatters' planned Time Winery (halted when he sold to Bai) looming above Black Sage Road, seemed solemn.

There seemed to be little information available on exactly what was going on.

Then I started hearing about the wines, and that Alsatian winemaking wizard Olivier Humbrecht MW was consulting, so was Napa-based Philippe Melka.

As the wines were gradually shared with critics, they were getting rave reviews from some, and of course cynical controversy roiled within the industry.

Personally, I hadn't tasted the wines, but my friend and fellow wine judge, Ross Wise was recruited from Ontario as winemaker (he is now at Black Hills), and I knew he had talent.

In October of 2019 I sat down with Humbrecht and tasted Phantom Creek's 2017 Riesling and Pinot Gris and was not surprisingly impressed with both.

Then during Vancouver's annual international wine festival (VIWF) in February 2020 I met Santiago Cilley. Newly arrived from Napa Valley, Cilley had been hired by Bai as the CEO for the estate.

It was a wise move; I could immediately sense Cilley had a greater understanding of solidifying relationships within the industry.

Then COVID hit, but the official opening of Phantom Creek wasn't hindered as much as it could have been; it officially opened June 12th.

When I sat down with Cilley in September and finally got a chance to taste through the wines, he noted that the winery had been built to accommodate private tastings, which isn't the case for the vast majority of wineries in the valley. So COVID-forced physical distancing and smaller group tastings was always going to be their norm.

Phantom Creek's seated tasting experiences cost \$20-\$25 per person and can be upgraded to add some small bites, or a charcuterie board.

Some facts:

- 2018 vintage was just bottled at 10,000 cases
- 2019 vintage will total 10,000 cases.
- 2020 vintage expectation is 16,000
- The estate can handle 25-40,000 as vineyard production grows.
- The estate currently encompasses 200 acres under vine but not all is in production. As of 2020, all vineyards will be organic.
- White labels denote single varietal wines; blends are in black.

- In addition to the Black Sage sites (Becker 52.4-acres and Phantom Creek 7-acres), Phantom Creek also has the 44-acre Golden Mile Bench vineyard called Kobau and the remainder in the new Bai Family Vineyard in the Similkameen.

From images I've seen, the finished project looks stunning.

When life starts to return to some form of normal, whatever that is, and I'm travelling again, I hope to get a look for myself.

Until then, the wines have convinced me this is more than just a vanity project, that Bai, and his team on the ground in the Okanagan, have built (are building) something epic.

Tasting Notes

Riesling 2018

Harvested from East Kelowna, this rich, peachy, and honeyed version has an oily and weighty palate thanks to an impressive 10-months on lees in stainless steel. It has concentration and complexity with plenty of phenolic texture. Lengthy, balanced and dry (3.24 gr/L) it has a distinct mineral character.

\$30

Viognier 2018

Phantom Creek's Golden Mile Bench's Kobau Vineyard produced this classic, unctuous Viognier; it spent 12 months being aged in 50/50 oak and stainless steel.

Peaches and exotic spice, ripe golden fruits and lively citrus make for a fantastic version. Cilley notes this wine is also made in an Alsatian style with long press cycles and long aging; they want texture and achieve it with slow and gentle winemaking. It shows on the palate.
\$40

Merlot 2017

Made from Kobau Vineyard (Golden Mile Bench) fruit, this Merlot spent 16-months in French oak barrels.

A notably plush nose shows cherry and coffee, vanilla licorice and baking spices.

A wave of freshness rolls across the supple palate; the tannins have a powdery mineral character. Integrated and lengthy with dark fruit and mocha flavours.

\$65

Becker Vineyard Cuvee 2017

Harvested solely from the namesake Black Sage vineyard, this Merlot dominant red is blended with 35% Cabernet Franc and 26% Cabernet Sauvignon.

It smells of blackberry and blueberry, baking spices and vanilla

The palate leans on chocolate and arugula, dark espresso and wild small black fruits. That savoury sort of earthy bitterness follows through the finish. It's youthful and still tightly wound.

\$60

Phantom Creek Vineyard Cuvee 2016

A Cabernet Sauvignon dominant red blended with Petit Verdot (a whopping 26%), Malbec, Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, which spent 22-months in oak. Luscious chocolate is muddled with purple berries, spice and pipe tobacco.

It's all about the palate here: intense but harmonious with woven flavours of spice, fruit and carob.

It has substance, weight, and complexity in spades.

Impressive.

\$100

Phantom Creek is represented by [Stile Brands](#)

~Daenna Van Mulligen

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