

27. Canada

Canada is a relatively small player in the international wine market. Despite being the world's second largest country by area, the vast majority of the country is unsuitable for viticulture due to high latitude and extremes of temperature. There are around 12,500 hectares under vine.¹

The vast majority of Canada's wine production comes from two provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, although small amounts of wine are also produced in Nova Scotia and Quebec. In fact, the vast majority of Canada's wine grapes are grown in Ontario's Niagara Peninsula and British Columbia's Okanagan Valley.

In the international market, Canada is most famous for its Icewine. Production began in the 1970s with German immigrants wanting to continue their tradition of *Eiswein*, and Canada is now the world's largest producer. However, Icewine represents only a small percentage of production and so Canada is looking to build an international reputation for high quality dry and sparkling wines.

French colonizers began arriving in the 1530s and they set up important trading networks. Much later Britain strove and succeeded in becoming the dominant colonial power, partly to reduce France's economic and strategic power. Colonial activity led to the deaths of many indigenous (known as First Nation) peoples with the introduction of diseases against which they had no protection, the loss of natural resources like timber and animals through European extraction, and the arrival of European firearms. Wars fought between European powers on First Nation land, and armed conflict against First Nation peoples, resulted in land and cultural loss for First Nation peoples.

After several centuries of colonial presence, commercial wine production in Canada started in the early 19th century. The land used for wine cultivation today is contested, and it is becoming common in Canada for scholars to acknowledge First Nation claims to land. The wine was initially produced from American hybrids and later *V. labrusca* grapes, which could withstand the harsh Canadian winters. In the early 20th century, these were joined by French hybrids, most notably Vidal Blanc, which is still widely used to produce Icewine.

The first plantings of *V. vinifera* only date back to the late 1950s and winemakers only began shifting their focus away from hybrids in the late 1980s. This push for quality was prompted, firstly, by a US-Canada trade deal which opened up the Canadian wine market to American imports and removed subsidies from Canadian growers and, secondly, by the introduction of an appellation system, the Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA), in Ontario and British Columbia (see [Wine Law and Regulations](#)).

Although, Canada experienced Prohibition from 1916 to 1927, unlike the USA, its wine industry was not adversely affected. Wine was exempt from prohibition and the number of licensed wineries actually increased in that period. However, when most of Canada's provinces repealed their Prohibition laws in the 1920s, a system of provincial liquor boards and government-run monopolies was introduced, which still strictly control the sale and distribution of alcohol in Canada today (see [Wine Business](#)).

27.1. The Growing Environment and Grape Growing

CLIMATE

Whilst Canada is generally categorized as a country with a cool climate this is somewhat of an oversimplification. Canada's two main wine regions are on opposite sides of the country, separated by approximately 4,000 kilometres (2,500 miles), and even the sub-regions within them have diverse and distinct conditions.

Ontario and the inland areas of British Columbia (where most of its vineyards are situated) have an extreme continental climate. In the summer, daytime temperatures can regularly exceed 30°C (86°F), whilst in the winter they can often drop below -20°C (-4°F). As a result, most Canadian vineyards are planted near lakes which moderate temperatures. During the winter, the lake effect reduces the risk of winter freeze. In the spring, the water heats up slowly delaying budbreak usually until after the risk of spring frosts has passed (though occasional frosts late in the spring can sometimes be an issue). It then retains summer warmth into the autumn, extending the growing season. The lakes also cause higher levels of humidity, raising the risk of fungal disease.

During the winter when the moisture from the lakes evaporates and meets the ambient cold air, it produces precipitation in the form of snow. This usually produces enough snow cover to protect the vines and insulate them from the cold air, although in the coldest areas, such as Prince Edward County, winter freeze is still a concern. Climate change is causing increasingly unpredictable winters and in some years there is minimal protective snow cover.

Drought is a regular concern in the inland regions of British Columbia, which lie in the rain shadow of two mountain ranges but it can also be an issue in hotter, drier years in Ontario.

Canada's vineyards are located between 41° and 51° N, stretching towards the northerly limit for viticulture. The northerly latitude, especially in British Columbia, makes for a shorter growing season but this is compensated for by longer daylight hours in the summer than more southerly wine regions, for example, in the USA.

VINEYARD MANAGEMENT

Despite being a relatively young industry, Canadian viticulture is very advanced. Producers have access to all the most up-to-date technology and vineyard management techniques. With each harvest, wineries are gaining more knowledge about how to get the best from their grapes and there is an increasing awareness of how different soils and microclimates can impact on the vines.

Careful canopy management is crucial in humid areas around lakes: the canopy needs to be as open as possible to improve air flow and reduce the risk of fungal diseases such as mildew and botrytis. VSP is therefore by far the most common training system in use, although some growers are experimenting on a smaller scale with other systems such as Geneva Double Curtain, Scott Henry and Lyre.

In hotter, drier areas such as in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, pests and diseases are less of a concern and growers are increasingly adopting sustainable and organic practices. The main vineyard pests in Canada are insects such as moths, mealy bugs and leafhoppers, birds and animals such as deer and even bears.

The growing season is shorter than in many traditional wine regions. Budbreak might be as late as early May with harvest starting in late August. Due to the different varieties grown and styles of wine produced, the harvest can continue into November (and into the following

February for Icewine). The weather during harvest can be unpredictable, with rain and autumn frosts, resulting in significant vintage variation.

Wineries in regions where drought is a regular concern, such as the Okanagan Valley, have installed irrigation systems with drip irrigation the most common.

In areas where the winters can be bitterly cold, such as Prince Edward County, some producers bury their vines to protect them. However, this is time-consuming and labour-intensive and therefore can significantly add to production costs. As a result, some wineries are experimenting with geotextiles, fabrics draped over the vines to help protect against winter damage. In the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys, where winters are not quite so bitter, growers protect their vines by pushing up the level of the soil around grafts to protect them.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Hybrid varieties have dominated Canadian wine production for much of its history. There are still significant plantings in Ontario; hybrids made up nearly 40 per cent of the harvest tonnage in 2019 (though most are used in International Canadian Blends rather than VQA wines, see [Wine Law and Regulations](#)).² However only very small amounts remain in British Columbia following a vine pull scheme in the late 1980s.

By far the most important of the hybrids is Vidal, a French hybrid which produces the majority of Icewine. It can withstand Canada's harsh winters and its high acidity (though not quite so high as Riesling), slow ripening and thick skins make it particularly suitable for sweet late-harvest wines and Icewine, even if these tend not to have the aromatic complexity and ageing potential of the finest Riesling Icewines. Whether dry or sweet, Vidal produces wines that are high in acidity with stone and tropical fruit flavours such as peach and mango.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the number of *vinifera* plantings, in particular the Bordeaux varieties (Merlot, Cabernet Franc and, to a lesser extent, Cabernet Sauvignon), Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and aromatic white varieties such as Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Riesling. Some winemakers are also experimenting with varieties such as Syrah, Viognier and Malbec.

The styles produced can vary quite significantly between the cooler climate of Ontario and the hotter areas of British Columbia, such as the southern Okanagan. However, due either to cooler temperatures or a wide diurnal range, Canadian wines all tend to be characterised by relatively high levels of acidity.

27.2. Winemaking

Since the late 1980s, quality has risen considerably as producers have embraced *V. vinifera* varieties and modern winemaking techniques. Canadian winemakers initially looked to follow the templates of more established regions, particularly those in Europe, but as they have developed their knowledge and expertise, they are increasingly looking to reduce intervention with ambient yeasts, unfiltered wines and more moderate use of new oak or increased use of neutral vessels. In cooler regions and in cooler years, chaptalization is sometimes practised.

ICEWINE

Canada is the world's largest producer of Icewine, and within Canada, Ontario accounts for the vast majority of production. Canada's bitterly cold winters mean that grapes left on the vine will routinely freeze (see the chapter on Specific Options for Producing Wines with Residual

Sugar in D1: Wine Production). Production regulations state that the grapes must be harvested at -8°C (18°F) or below; such cold temperatures are often reached during the Canadian winter. Some wineries harvest by hand, but with the difficulty of sourcing pickers to work at night in very cold temperatures, many now machine harvest.

Freezing concentrates the sugars in the grapes. The very high levels of sugar in the must often mean that fermentation stops naturally at around 9–11% abv and leaving around 200–250 g/L of residual sugar. The grape varieties used should have high natural acidity to balance this sweetness. The best have intense aromas of stone and tropical fruits, such as peach and mango. Most Icewine is made from Vidal, although the most complex and well-balanced examples tend to be produced from Riesling. Other varieties are used, such as Cabernet Franc, Gewurztraminer and Chardonnay.



Grapes for Icewine

Icewines are often fermented and stored in stainless steel to retain the aromas and flavours of the grape variety, however, oak maturation is sometimes used to add extra flavours (vanilla, clove, etc.).

Icewine is very expensive to produce. Yields are very low, as little as 10 per cent of a still wine harvest. This is partly due to the grapes dehydrating but also because significant numbers of grapes can be damaged or lost due to bad weather, rot and animals while waiting for temperatures to drop to -8°C (18°F) or below. As a result, Icewine commands premium and super-premium prices and, in 2021, though representing only 15 per cent by volume, it made up 61 per cent of Canadian bottled-wine exports by value.³

'Icewine' is a trade mark owned by the Canadian Vintners Association, which works to promote and protect the category. Due to its value to the Canadian wine industry, there are rigorous standards of production, which have been incorporated into the VQA system (see [Wine Law and Regulations](#)) in both Ontario and British Columbia. Canadian federal law states that only wine that is made exclusively from grapes naturally frozen on the vine can be labelled as Icewine. It must be made exclusively from grapes grown in Canada and either from *vinifera* grapes or Vidal, harvesting and winemaking procedures: for example, minimum sugar

levels are prescribed (which are higher than for German *Eiswein*) and artificial concentration or addition of sugars is prohibited.

27.3. Wine Law and Regulations

Ontario introduced VQA legislation in 1988 and British Columbia followed in 1990. VQA wines must be made exclusively from grapes grown in the respective province, although the rules for regional and sub-appellations vary. Wines must be made from 100 per cent *vinifera* grapes or certain permitted hybrids.

VQA laws lay down certain standards for grape growing and wine production such as minimum must weights and chaptalization limits. Wines are tested for eligibility through sensory evaluation panel and laboratory analysis.

VQA wines with a single variety stated on the label must contain at least 85 per cent of that variety whilst where two or more varieties are listed those varieties must make up at least 95 per cent of the wine.

Within the VQA system, both Ontario and British Columbia have approved a number of regional appellations and sub-appellations which can appear on labels.

A significant amount of wine bottled in Canada is still produced at least in part from imported must or wine. These wines must be labelled 'International blend from imported and domestic wines' or 'International blend from domestic and imported wines'. These wines retail for much lower average prices than VQA wines.

Wines that are made entirely from Canadian grapes but do not qualify for VQA status may state 'Product of Canada' on the label.

27.4. Principal Wine Regions

ONTARIO

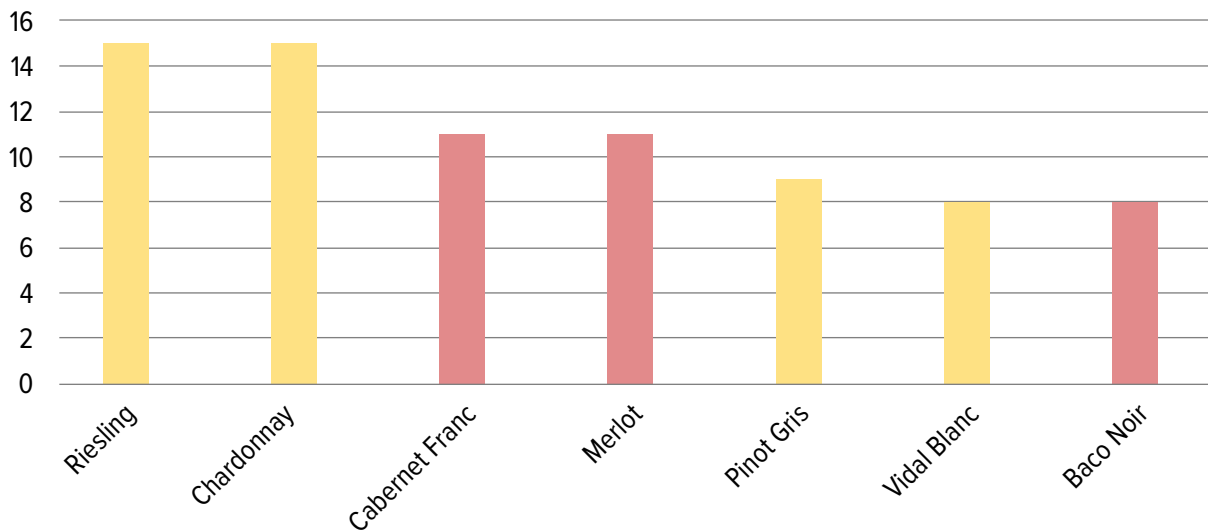
Ontario is Canada's largest wine-producing province, with 7,200 hectares under vine within its appellations.⁴ The vineyards are located between 41° and 44°N, roughly equivalent to the range from Central Italy to Bordeaux although with a significantly different climate.

Ontario's vineyards are mainly planted on or near the shores of two of the Great Lakes (Erie and Ontario) which moderate the extremes of Ontario's continental climate; moving further away from the lakes, winters are too cold for *vinifera* varieties to survive. The cooling influence of the lakes in the summer means that the wines tend to have medium (+) to high acidity; however, thanks to the long sunshine hours during the growing season, the grapes develop ripe fruit flavours.

There is a wide variety of soils (clay and sand, and to a lesser extent gravel and rocks) and the areas around the lakes have a high concentration of limestone from an ancient seabed that was exposed over a long period of glacial activity.

Ontario produces approximately 90 per cent of Canada's Icewine and Vidal is the most widely planted variety in the province. Amongst still, non-late harvest VQA wines, the proportion of red and white wine produced is approximately equal, with a small proportion of rosé produced (44, 47, 10 per cent respectively).⁵ Grape varieties that can ripen in cool climates and survive cold winter conditions dominate. The two most planted white *vinifera* varieties are Riesling and Chardonnay. Ontario Riesling is typically high in acidity with citrus, peach and floral aromas. The wines range from dry to sweet. Chardonnay wines tend to have medium (+)

Ontario, top varieties, 2021, percentage of total VQA wines only



Source: VQA Ontario⁶

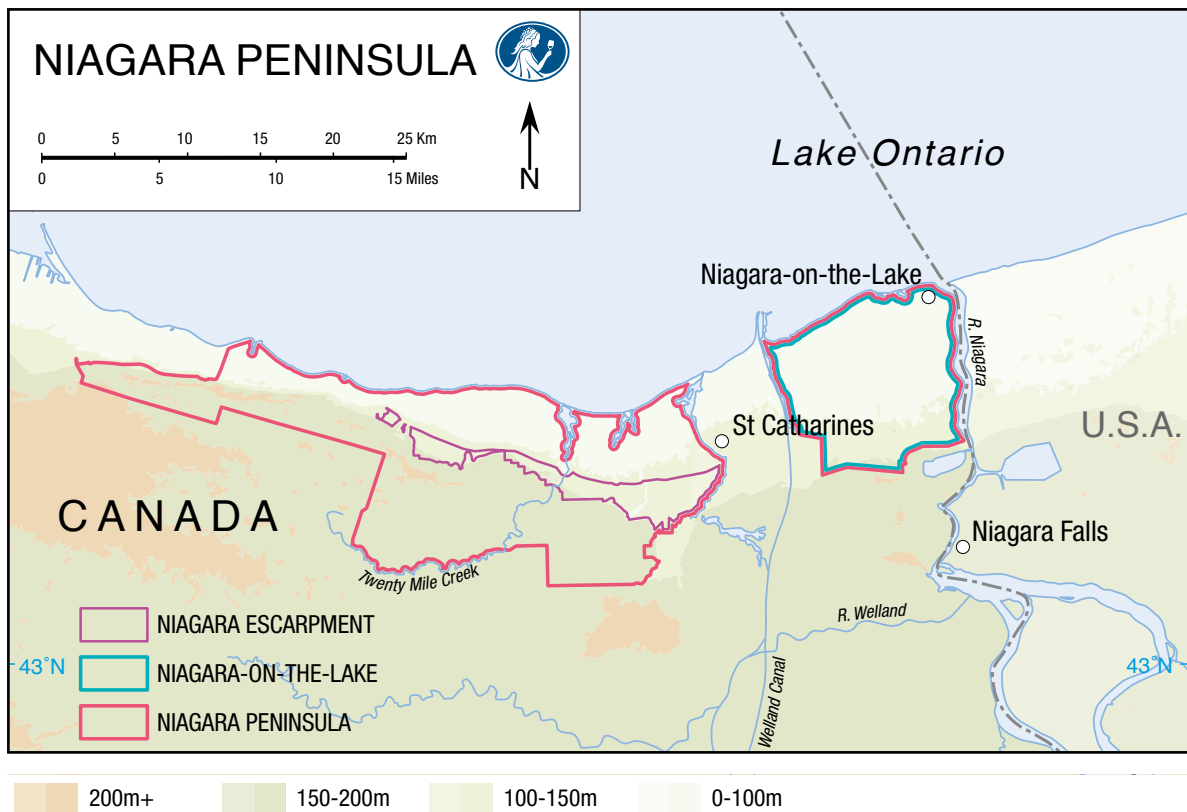
to high acidity, with apple and citrus fruit flavours typical of a cooler climate, although stone fruit and even tropical fruit flavours can be found in wine from warmer sites or vintages.

Cabernet Franc is the most planted black variety, producing elegant, fresh wines with red plum, red berry, green pepper and herbal characteristics. Many producers age the wines in oak for greater texture and complexity of flavours. It is often used in Bordeaux-style blends and is also used to produce excellent Icewine. Merlot is also used in Bordeaux-style blends; on its own, it produces soft, medium-bodied reds with medium tannins and dark fruit characteristics. Although plantings are still small, Pinot Noir is also showing great potential, producing medium bodied wines, with red cherry and strawberry fruit flavours. Gamay Noir is also on the increase producing mainly light-bodied wines with fresh, red fruit flavours, although some producers are making a richer, oak-aged style.

Ontario was the first province to adopt VQA legislation in 1988. There are three primary appellations: Niagara Peninsula, Lake Erie North Shore and Prince Edward County. If one of these three appellations appears on the label, at least 85 per cent of grapes must come from that appellation and the rest must be sourced from elsewhere in Ontario. VQA wines are typically good to very good with some outstanding examples and the dry wines are typically mid-priced to premium priced. Significant producers include Inniskillin and Peller Estates.

Niagara Peninsula

The Niagara Peninsula is the largest wine-producing region in Ontario accounting for over 80 per cent of vineyards. It is a diverse area, stretching from the shore of Lake Ontario up to the Niagara Escarpment, a north-facing limestone bluff which rises to around 100 metres above the level of neighbouring Lake Ontario. Various river valleys cut down from the escarpment to the lake. There is therefore a wide variety of soils and microclimates allowing for the production of wines in a range of styles. The majority of vineyards are situated on benches part way up the escarpment and the slopes just above them, although some are situated on the plain directly next to the lake and some are situated above the escarpment.



Together, Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment have a major influence on the climate in the area. Ontario is one of the deepest of the Great Lakes, meaning it takes longer to warm up in the spring, and takes longer to cool down in the autumn. The lake and escarpment aid the circulation of air in the region.

During the winter, the land away from the lake cools quickly. Cold air above this land flows down the slope of the escarpment under the influence of gravity. At the same time relatively warm air over the lake rises and flows inland. As cold air flows down the escarpment, it is replaced by the warm air above. The lake and escarpment provide warming air flow in winter and cooling air flow in the summer, prolonging the growing season and reducing the risk of fungal disease and frosts. The escarpment also protects the area from the prevailing south-westerly winds which can be bitterly cold in winter.

On top of the ridge above the escarpment, away from the influence of the lake, the climate is more continental with noticeably warm summer temperatures and cold winters.

The Niagara Peninsula has two regional appellations: Niagara Escarpment and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Wines labelled with these appellations must contain at least 85 per cent of grapes from that appellation – the remainder must come from elsewhere within the Niagara Peninsula. The Niagara Peninsula also has a number of smaller sub-appellations (not covered here) both within and outside the borders of the two regional appellations. Wines labelled with a sub-appellation must contain grapes entirely from that sub-appellation.

Niagara Escarpment – This covers the benches and gentle, northern slopes of the escarpment (but not the land nearer the lake nor the plateau on top). The combination of altitude and cooling lake breezes makes this the coolest part of the Peninsula, resulting in wines with high levels of acidity. Early ripening Chardonnay and Pinot Noir can make wines of very good quality. Cabernet Franc and Riesling also do particularly well here.

Niagara-on-the-Lake – This covers a large area of the relatively flat land along the shores of Lake Ontario, directly to the west of the Niagara River. Overall, it is slightly warmer than the slopes of the escarpment; proximity to the lake reduces the drop in night-time temperatures and means autumns stay warmer longer. Whilst the main grapes are still Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc, they produce slightly riper and fruitier wines than those from Niagara Escarpment and this area is better suited to producing Bordeaux style red blends.



Vineyards on the Niagara Escarpment

Lake Erie North Shore

This appellation stretches along the gently-sloping shoreline of Lake Erie and includes a number of islands, including Pelee Island. The vineyard area is almost completely surrounded by water, which therefore plays a key role in moderating temperatures. Lake Erie is the shallowest of the Great Lakes and therefore warms up more quickly in spring but cools down more quickly in autumn. As a result, winter freeze is more of a concern than in Niagara.

Nevertheless, this is still the warmest of Ontario's vineyard areas as it is located in the far south-western corner of the province: this means that Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon usually ripen fully. As a result, the wines tend to show more ripe fruit but often less structure than those from Niagara Peninsula.



Close proximity to lakes moderates vineyard temperatures in Lake Erie North Shore

Prince Edward County

Towards the eastern end of Lake Ontario, this is Ontario's most northerly appellation. It is almost entirely surrounded by water and is fully exposed to winter winds coming over Lake Ontario from the west. Due to latitude, winter freeze is a regular concern forcing producers to protect their vines over the winter either by burying or covering them.



Stony topsoil in Prince Edward County aids grape ripening

The vineyard area is situated on a broad limestone plateau with a stony topsoil that conducts heat and radiates it at night, aiding ripening in this very cool region. Early-ripening Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are the most common grape varieties, and both red and white wines are characterised by their extremely high acidity in all but the warmest vintages.

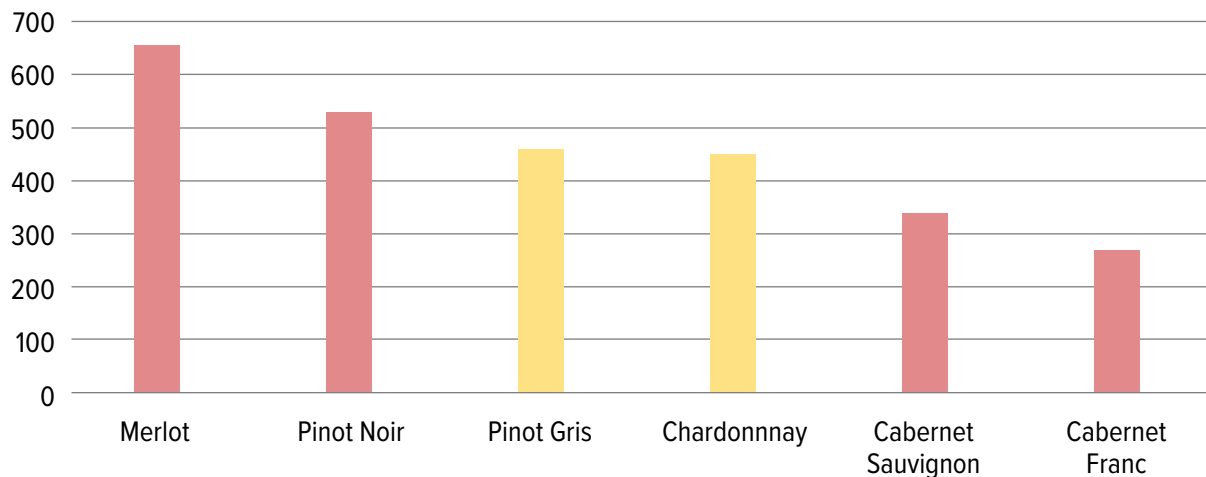
BRITISH COLUMBIA

On the opposite side of the country to Ontario, British Columbia has just over 4,500 ha of vineyard plantings.⁷ The vineyard area can be split into two very distinct areas: there are a small number of vineyards close to the Pacific coast with a cool, maritime climate but the main area is some 400 kilometres (250 miles) inland, sheltered from any maritime influence by several mountain ranges, and where the Okanagan Valley is the largest appellation.

British Columbia's vineyards are further north (48°–51°) than those of Ontario. As a result, the growing season is shorter but, during the growing season, the days are longer. Inland in particular, the long, hot summer days and cool nights create a wide diurnal range. This produces grapes which develop ripe, fruit flavours whilst retaining high levels of acidity.

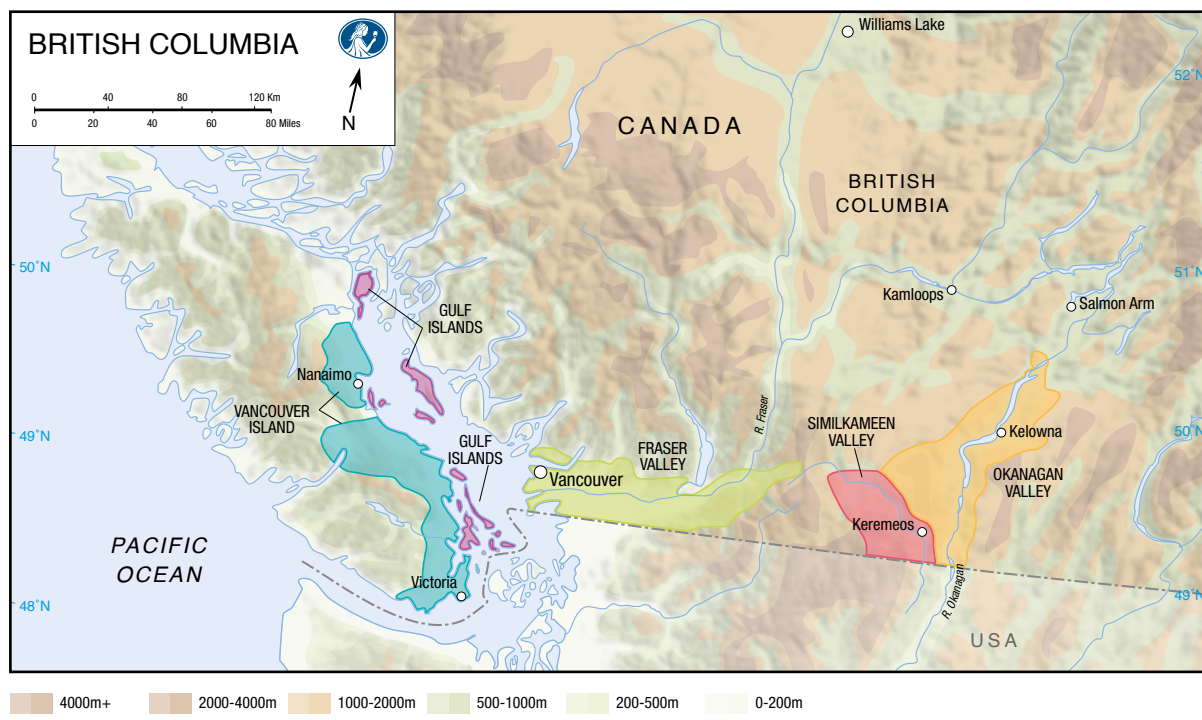
In the late 1980s, a radical vine pull scheme targeting hybrid varieties reduced British Columbia's vineyard area by around two-thirds. Only very small amounts of hybrids remain (notably Vidal for Icewine); however, there have been significant new plantings of a wide range of international varieties.

British Columbia, top varieties, hectares, 2019



Source: British Columbia Wine Grape Council⁸

Virtually equal amounts of red and white wine are produced. Merlot is the most planted black grape in British Columbia, it tends to be more full-bodied than that in Ontario, with higher tannin levels, higher alcohol and riper fruit flavours. Pinot Noir is also riper and fruitier in British Columbia with relatively high tannins, though in the coolest sites it can produce elegant wines and plantings have been increasing rapidly. Where it can ripen fully, Cabernet Sauvignon produces intensely fruity wines with high tannins and acidity with considerable ageing potential with much more consistency year on year than is possible in Ontario.



The most planted white grape in British Columbia is Pinot Gris, which usually produces wines in a dry or off-dry style, medium-bodied, with medium to high acidity and flavours of melon and pear. However, some wines are produced in a lighter Pinot Grigio style. A variety of styles of Chardonnay are produced but the best tend to be medium-bodied and with riper,

stone fruit flavours than in Ontario. VQA wines are typically good to very good with some outstanding examples and the wines are typically mid-priced to premium priced. Significant producers include Le Vieux Pin and Mission Hill.

A number of appellations have been created within the VQA system, the most important of which are discussed below. If named on the label, 95 per cent of the grapes must have come from that appellation and the remainder from elsewhere within British Columbia.

Okanagan Valley

The Okanagan Valley makes up almost 85 per cent of British Columbia's vine plantings.⁹ Over 250 kilometres (150 miles) in length, it covers a wide range of different climates from the cool, northern end (which is one of the most northerly wine-producing areas in the world) to the hot desert conditions in the south. A number of sub-appellations are being created to recognise the particular characteristics of the various sub-regions.

The majority of soils are glacial deposits of various types, particularly loams, and become increasingly sandy in the south. As a result, irrigation is essential.

The valley is characterised by a chain of lakes which play an important role in moderating the hot summer and cold winter temperatures. The most important of these lakes is the deep Okanagan Lake which occupies the northern half of the vineyard area. These lakes are much smaller than the Great Lakes in Ontario and therefore have a much smaller moderating effect.



Lakes moderate the continental climate in the Okanagan Valley

The lakes also play an important role in providing water for irrigation, which is essential as the annual rainfall is between around 300 mm per annum in the south and 400 mm in the north. However, the dry conditions mean pests and disease are not much of a problem and organic viticulture is on the increase.

This is an extreme continental climate. Winters are cold, although not so cold as to force growers to bury their vines. Spring frosts are a concern and vineyards are generally planted on mid-level slopes to reduce the risk. The growing season is relatively short but the days

are long. Summers can be hot – in the warmer parts of the valley, temperatures can hit 40°C (104°F) despite the lake effect. However, due to the altitude (around 300–600 metres above sea level) the nights are cool creating a wide diurnal range.

At the northern end of the valley and on east-facing slopes that are shaded from the afternoon sun, conditions are more suited to cooler-climate varieties, such as Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Riesling, Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer.

The hotter, southern areas of the valley are better suited to black grape varieties. Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and even Syrah can all ripen fully to produce full-bodied wines with ripe fruit characteristics which are often high in alcohol whilst retaining a good balance of acidity.

Similkameen Valley

To the west of the extreme southern end of Okanagan Valley, this is a rugged, rocky valley with a narrow strip of agricultural land along the Similkameen River. High mountains on either side funnel constant winds down the valley.



Mountains on either side funnel winds down the Similkameen Valley

The climate is similar to that of the Okanagan Valley except that, without any lakes to moderate temperature, summer days are very hot and the mountains also trap heat in the valley later into the evening. However, once temperatures drop, due to the altitude (400–500 metres above sea levels), the nights are cold, creating an even wider diurnal range than most of the Okanagan Valley.

The main grape varieties are Merlot, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands and Fraser Valley

These small coastal regions have a cool, maritime climate moderated by the Pacific Ocean. Winters are mild with no concerns over winter freeze. Summers are cooler and wetter than elsewhere in British Columbia, and fungal diseases can be problematic. Only early-ripening

varieties are successful in these cooler, damper conditions, most notably Pinot Noir, in particular in parts of Vancouver Island.

27.5. Wine Business

With the notable exception of Icewine, almost all Canadian wine is consumed domestically. Over recent years, domestic wine consumption has been on the increase, as beer sales have remained flat (though beer sales still exceed wine sales by both volume and value).¹⁰ Due to relatively low production and the inability to produce certain styles of wines (e.g. the full-bodied, very ripe wines of lower latitude climates), demand exceeds supply and Canada is still a large net importer of wine.

In 2021, Canada exported one million litres of bottled wine at a value of around \$23.5 million with the top export markets in terms of value being China, the USA and Hong Kong.¹¹

Vineyards in Canada tend to be small, especially in British Columbia. They are owned by both growers and estates and, whilst the majority of producers grow their own grapes, many supplement these with grapes purchased from other growers. In recent years, many growers have moved into wine production contributing to a large increase in the number of wineries, particularly in British Columbia.

Provincial liquor boards have significant control over the distribution and sales of alcoholic beverages in all provinces (although their regulations differ widely, and some are reviewing and modernising their current legislation). Due to their size, some, such as the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) and Société des Alcools du Québec (SAQ) are among the largest buyers of alcoholic beverages in the world.

Most wine is consumed within the province where it is made as regulations of provincial liquor boards make shipping wine between most provinces illegal or highly complex. Only some provinces allow direct to consumer shipping from Canadian wineries. This is one of the reasons (along with proximity to urban areas in Niagara Peninsula's case) why wine tourism has quickly become a very important part of the Canadian wine business so that consumers can pick up wines from the cellar door.

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