



PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

Wade Stark of Ganton and Larsen Prospect Winery (left) is a proud member of the Okanagan Valley's agricultural community, a region steeped in history and unique heritage dating back to the early 1800s. The young winemaker is also at the forefront of his craft. Under Stark's winemaking guidance, Prospect wines have garnered 200 medals in competitions since 2007.

A toast to the season's finest and Okanagan Valley's rich heritage

It was approaching dusk one recent day in late September, and winemaker Wade Stark, who might otherwise have been found carefully tending his latest vintages in the cellar at Ganton and Larsen Prospect Winery, was instead chasing a black bear from one of his vineyards. Welcome to harvest time in the Okanagan Valley.

"We typically have people milling around, keeping the birds, deer and other wildlife away. I happened to be driving up an isolated vineyard road. Sure enough, there's a black bear. He was looking happy, a little pudgy around the middle."

Bears can run fast, explains Stark with a smile. "He sees me and he takes off; I bet he hit about 35 kilometres. And with amazing speed and dexterity, he went under a wire fence without even breaking stride."

For Stark it was a poignant, Okanagan Valley moment. "You're trying to reach this optimal ripeness and you discover your animal friends have been having Thanksgiving early."

Though modern winemaking and viticulture is sophisticated, in many ways Stark and his contemporaries experience many of the joys and travails that Okanagan farmers have since the mid 1800s when commercial orchards, ranches and farms began springing up here.

"It's a beautiful area – so interesting. We're right on the intersection of wilderness, city and vineyards," he says.

Ultimately, Stark – like every other Okanagan Valley winemaker – is subject to the whims of nature, which ultimately influences each year's crops.

Though he's just 38 years old, Stark has already seen 11 Okanagan harvests, and he's now three weeks into his 12th. "Every year has its surprises. And each year defines the vintage. In 2003, we had the Okanagan fire; 2006 was gorgeous; this year has been full of surprises."

Stark describes how 2009's "brutal winter" gave way to an unseasonably cloudy and cool spring.

"Then, in mid-June the weather returned to more seasonal temperatures and good stretches of hot temperatures. That carried into August, and it just blasted right through with unseasonal highs into the first three weeks of September."

"We had been expecting a year of the white (wine), so we began harvesting like mad. Then, September's high day-time temperatures and warm nights came along and began shaking the acids out of the grapes. Suddenly, it looks like the reds are shaping up and they're going to be great, too."

Now, with Thanksgiving fast approaching, he says everyone in the Valley has good reason to pause.

"It's a chance to take a breath, visit family and enjoy the fruits of our labour. It's important to take time to reflect, get strong and then get back to the final push. It's an entire industry, a community. We're all living the same experience."

For Stark and company, that final push will mean the careful culling of ripened

grapes from five distinct, microclimatic growing areas throughout the Valley. Each supports particular varietals – rich Merlot and Shiraz from Oliver and Osoyoos in the south, to crisp and flavourful

Riesling, Pinot Grigio and others along the Naramata bench and into Kelowna.

"Each vineyard produces fruits with distinct flavour profiles. It enables us to build complex wines at a cost that

doesn't break the bank."

Stark isn't boasting. Under his guidance, Prospect wines have garnered 200 medals in domestic and international competition, including best-in-class Chardonnay at the 2008 International Wine and Spirit Competition in London, and a Gold Medal for Prospect's Major Allen Merlot in the 2008 Northwest Wine Summit.

The wines have received a strong nod of approval from drinkers, too, and are among B.C.'s top-selling VQA wines.

Among his favourites now ready for drinking is the fresh, fruit-forward Census Count Chardonnay, and the classically styled Haynes Barn Merlot Cabernet.

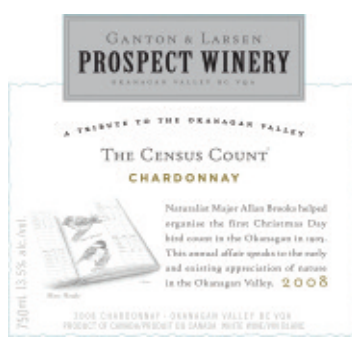
Adding another dimension to Prospect's wines, each label – designed by a local artist – pays homage to the Okanagan Valley's rich heritage.

"We'll be harvesting for another week. Thanksgiving will be our first break in a long time," says Stark, proudly. "I look forward to pulling a couple of those bottles and enjoying them."

A taste of the Valley

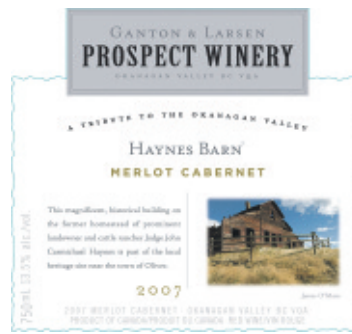
2008 Census Count Chardonnay

The 2008 Census Count Chardonnay is a treat for Chardonnay lovers. Luscious ripe apple and pear notes linger with a rich, long finish. This wine's balanced fruit and oak characteristics lends to its elegant taste.



2007 Haynes Barn Merlot Cabernet

This rich and bright Merlot Cabernet's supple red berry and cherry aromas combine nicely with good structure, medium tannin and weight, completed by a generous finish.



This report was produced by RandallAnthony Communications Inc. (www.randallanthony.com) in conjunction with the advertising department of The Globe and Mail. Richard Deacon, National Business Development Manager, rdeacon@globeandmail.com.



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