



ON THE VINE

By JOHN SCHREINER

QUAILS' GATE AT 25

This family-operated vineyard started cautiously as a farm-gate winery and today stands out among more than 270 wineries in B.C.

When Quails' Gate started in 1989, there were about 20 wineries in British Columbia. Today, there are 273 wineries, including 235 grape wineries. You would expect it is hard to stand out in the crowd. That's not so with Quails' Gate. The winery has been so successful that its owners, the Stewart family, also recently launched a Napa Valley wine label called Plume and, with a partner, bought Lake of the Moon winery in Sonoma.

It did not always look rosy. In 1984, when Ben Stewart and his father, Richard, first wanted to start a winery, they could not get bank financing. That was surprising, considering the Stewart family has been active in Okanagan agriculture since the beginning of the 20th century. Richard had been growing grapes on what is now the Quails' Gate vineyard in West Kelowna since the early 1960s. However, the bank's attitude was a piece of luck – interest rates were over the moon at the time.

Ben started Quails' Gate cautiously in 1989 as a farm-gate winery because the small size limited financial exposure. Within two years, Quails' Gate moved to the larger estate winery status. Ben's younger brother, Tony, joined in

the growing business in 1992. When Ben went into politics, Tony took over as president.

In 1994, Quails' Gate was the first Okanagan winery to hire a winemaker from Australia, recruiting Jeff Martin, a 20-year veteran from the McWilliams winery. Martin, who now owns LaFrenz Winery on Naramata Road, made wines at Quails' Gate that consumers coveted, including Old Vines Foch, a cult favourite. When he left in 1999, he was replaced by two more Australians and then, in 2003, by Grant Stanley, a Canadian trained in New Zealand.

Stanley, who became a partner in another Okanagan winery in 2013, is especially passionate about Pinot Noir. The Stewarts had been the first in British Columbia to plant a commercially successful block of Pinot Noir in 1975. Those plantings have expanded continually because that varietal has become the flagship wine for Quails' Gate.

Stanley was succeeded as winemaker in 2013 by another Pinot Noir partisan, Nikki Callaway, a Canadian who earned her winemaking degrees in France. She had spent four years

previously at Mission Hill. Among other wines, she made the Martin's Lane Pinot Noir that was the best Pinot Noir under £25 at a Decanter competition in London last year.

The parade of talented winemakers is one key to Quails' Gate's success. The second was Richard Stewart's genius in buying in 1956 what has turned out to be the best vineyard site in West Kelowna. "I bought it as an investment," says Stewart, now retired at 88. The third key is the family's business acumen that turned the winery into a destination with an appealing tasting room and a first-rate restaurant.

In a time when outside investors, including several from China, have bought Okanagan wineries, Quails' Gate remains family-operated.

John Schreiner is author of John Schreiner's Okanagan Wine Tour Guide and other books on wine. goodgrog@shaw.ca



Quails' Gate's first-class restaurant has helped turn the winery into a destination.