

# Roller coaster ride of Blasted Church Vineyards

WHEN they bought an Okanagan winery in 2002, Chris and Evelyn Campbell undoubtedly thought they were going to a bucolic, if challenging, life in the vineyard after careers in the corporate fast lane.

Bucolic hardly comes to mind now. They have faced some unusual challenges, and have risen to each with enormous resilience. After two tough years, Blasted Church is poised to take its place among the Okanagan's top wineries.

The Campbells have had several careers, beginning with hotel management. They moved from that to accounting: Evelyn is a certified general accountant who had her own practice in West Vancouver, while Chris spent many years managing the accounting and back office work for Vancouver brokerage houses.

Five years ago, they decided to find a business of their own, eventually settling on wine. Because they are careful accountants, they took a couple of years researching wineries for sale in the Okanagan before settling on what is now Blasted Church.

Located north of Okanagan Falls, on the east side of Skaha Lake, it was then known as Prpich Hills. A Croatian grape grower named Dan Prpich, who



## BACCHUS' NOTES

by JOHN SCHREINER

had been growing grapes in the Okanagan since 1973, had opened the winery in 2000. Prpich decided to retire a few years later and put the winery and vineyard on the market.

The Campbells took over a 42-acre vineyard and a winery operating nowhere near its capacity of 10,000 cases a year. The winery was poorly equipped and had no consumer recognition. However, the Campbells saw that the site had the potential to produce very good wine. The vineyard is on a sunny plateau that slopes southwest toward the lake. A large number of varieties, both red and white, had been planted, representing a lot of scope.

The first challenge for the Campbells was selling the wines they had inherited. Made by a consulting winemaker, the wines were sound but nothing special. Since no one knew the Prpich label anyway, they decided to replace it immediately.

As shrewd business people, the Campbells believe in bringing in experts when required. For the new name, they hired a hot-shot Vancouver marketer named Bernie Hadley-Beauregard. He canvassed about 400 possible names before settling, brilliantly, on Blasted Church. His clever caricature labels propelled the wines off the shelf.

Blasted Church worked so well as the winery's new name because there is a good local story behind it. There is an old wooden church in Okanagan Falls that was moved there about 75 years ago from the abandoned mining town of Fairview. To take the church apart for the move, the crew loosened the nails in the old beams by setting off a couple of sticks of dynamite. The first labels designed by Hadley-Beauregard recounted that story. Since then, the colourful labels have served as story boards for other events around that same theme.

Needing an experienced winemaker and vineyard manager, the Campbells hired Frank Supernak in July 2002. Frank had tons of experience, having just spent five years overhauling the Hester Creek vineyard.

Unfortunately, Frank died in an accident in another winery in November 2002, just a week after completing the harvest at Blasted Church. Other winemakers volunteered to help the Campbells finish the wines, many of which still were fermenting. Thus, the 2002 wines at Blasted Church were started by Frank and finished by Ashley Hooper, then the winemaker at Quails' Gate.

The Campbells advertised for a new winemaker. The successful applicant was a young South African, Willem Grobbelaar, who arrived in the summer of 2003. Professionally trained, he had made wine both in South Africa and in California.

It was obvious when Blasted Church began releasing its 2003 white wines this spring that Grobbelaar knows his stuff. The wines – Chardonnay, Ehrenfelser, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Riesling – are fresh and bursting with fruit. He even made an astonishing Syrah, so good that

the winery sells it for \$40 a bottle and only at the winery.

Unfortunately for Blasted Church, the Canadian government refused to extend the winemaker's work permit and he had to return to South Africa.

Once again, the Campbells had to advertise for a new winemaker. The result was the best stroke of luck they have had in some time. The winning applicant, who has just arrived at the winery, is Marcus Ansems, a young Australian who, crucially, has worked in Canada before and has a Canadian wife.

Ansems, 28, has his enology degree from Australia's top wine school. He also comes with a pedigree: his uncle owns an excellent small winery there called Mount Langi Ghiran where Ansems got early experience.

He came to Ontario in 1999 to a winery called Creekside. The winery has just been taken over by a well-heeled business couple. Ansems not only made wine but he supervised the construction of a winery, the planting of a couple of vineyards and the recruitment of professionals for the cellar. Creekside wanted to keep him but he returned to Australia last year to do his own thing there.

His return to Canada, it appears, had something to do with his wife's desire to come back. Blasted Church has ended up with an experienced young winemaker who was beginning to accumulate awards in Ontario. Ansems is particular strong with Syrah (as an Australian, he'd call it Shiraz). He persuaded Creekside to put in one of the largest Syrah vineyards in Ontario. I am willing to bet he'll advise the Campbells to replace some of the Lemberger in their vineyard with Syrah. You can never have too much Syrah but you can sure have too much Lemberger.

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