

Bare Essentials

—*Innovation at LaStella Winery*

ALTHOUGH IT IS a fairly new player in the B.C. wine scene, LaStella Winery is showing an exceptional commitment to quality that seems to transcend the normal realities of the wine business—and it is creating quite a stir. The winery is owned by husband-and-wife team Sean and Saeedeh Salem, but day-to-day operations are in the hands of executive director Rasoul Salehi and winemaker Daniel Bontorin. These two driven young men operate with a mandate to experiment, and are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve the finest wine they can. Both are passionate about quality, and they scour the wine world for innovative techniques and successful practices that they can incorporate into LaStella's operations.

The winery itself has a lot of beautiful architectural details and is situated on a gentle bank overlooking Osoyoos Lake. With wines named after Italian music terminology, the feel is very European; a little like Central Italy itself. LaStella has recently been granted a picnic license, which means you can pack some Tuscan-inspired fare on your next visit and enjoy it with a glass of wine on the patio overlooking the lake. Soon, with the completion of a new dock, you will be able to arrive in true style, by boat or seaplane.

The inspiration for LaStella comes from the Bolgheri region in Tuscany, home of the Super Tuscan wines, which combine the Italian sangiovese with Bordeaux varieties such as

merlot and cabernet sauvignon. Sangiovese has been planted on the property and the first wines will be made from the 2009 vintage. The initial vintages (the first was 2006) have focused on Maestoso and Allegretto (both merlot), but also include white wines Vivace (a pinot grigio) and Leggiero (an unoaked chardonnay), and a rosé named LaStellina.

The number of innovations used to create these wines is impressive for such a small winery. LaStella is the first in Canada to use titanium dioxide-covered vinyl vineyard posts; they dabble in biodynamic techniques; they incorporate falcons to scare off other birds; they have an on-site compost program; and they are willing to take yields to seemingly ridiculous levels of a scant one ton per acre.

From a business perspective, some of these techniques seem unworkable—until you try the wines. The results speak for themselves. The Awards that LaStella has recently received show that you don't need decades of history to get respect for the wines. The Leggiero 2008 Unoaked Chardonnay recently won the Okanagan Spring Wine Festival Best of Varietal competition. Their flagship wine, the Maestoso Merlot, was a Gold Medal winner at the 2008 Canadian Wine Awards. At \$85 a bottle, this wine receives the full luxury treatment in the vineyard and cellar, starting with numerous clones, a unique yeast strain sourced from Italy, fanatical sorting of the berries, top oak and no fining or filtration.

It is exciting to see a winery with such a focus on making the best and a willingness to push the boundaries in order to achieve it. It is experimentation that leads to the greatest discoveries and LaStella is certainly raising the bar for winemaking in Canada.

—*Rhys Pender*

