

Canada's Only 'Desert' Is Also One of Its Most Exciting Wine Regions—Here's How to Explore It

In British Columbia's semi-arid South Okanagan, desert landscapes meet world-class wineries.

By [Vivian Chung](#) | Published on March 2, 2026



Though Canada's only desert ecosystem is centered around Osoyoos, wine lovers often explore it together with nearby Oliver, as both towns share an arid climate, sun-soaked landscapes, and a long agricultural history, making this stretch one of the country's most distinctive wine regions. Here's what you need to know about why the Oliver–Osoyoos corridor consistently produces some of Canada's most characterful wines and how to navigate it, straight from local winemakers.

Desert-like Conditions That Make This Wine Region Distinct



Sitting at the southern tip of the [Okanagan Valley](#), about a five-hour drive east of Vancouver, British Columbia's largest grape-growing region unfolds across sunny vineyards, orchards, and shimmering lakes, creating one of the province's most notable wine destinations. Unlike much of Canada, sagebrush, bunchgrass, and prickly pear cactus dot the hillsides here, giving the area an almost southwestern U.S. feel.

Despite its sun-baked appearance, the [Oliver–Osoyoos corridor](#) is technically a cool-climate wine region because of its northern latitude and cold winters. “It gives us our own identity of wine,” says Justin Hall, winemaker at [Nk'Mip Cellars](#), North America's first Indigenous-owned winery, referring to the combination of hot summers and frigid winters. Syrah and cabernet sauvignon flourish in 95-degree-Fahrenheit heat, and winter lows as cold as -4 degrees Fahrenheit create perfect conditions for delicate ice wines.

The corridor is marked by dramatic diurnal swings—warm days and cool nights—paired with low annual rainfall, averaging about 10 inches. Gentle slopes and benchlands capture sunlight by day and channel cooling air at night, while soils ranging from clay and sand to gravel and alluvial deposits, along with the moderating influence of Osoyoos Lake and the Okanagan River, give winemakers remarkable flexibility within a compact area, notes Manpreet Dhaliwal, winemaker at [Kismet Estate Winery](#) and Canada's first South Asian female winemaker. Together, these conditions support wines across the spectrum.

The Flavors of Oliver and Osoyoos



The South Okanagan is best known for bold, expressive wines. “Heat-loving red varieties such as cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, syrah, and malbec thrive in the long, warm growing season and develop deep color, ripe tannins, and concentrated fruit,” says Dhaliwal. “Aromatic whites and specialty varieties like viognier and chardonnay also perform well, as hot days build flavor while cool nights preserve fresh acidity and aromatic intensity.”

Wines from Oliver and Osoyoos often stand out for their ripe, sun-driven character. “Generous flavors of stone fruits like peaches and apricots, as well as dark fruits like black cherries and plums, [are] paired with a sense of depth on the palate,” says Dhaliwal. “First-time tasters often notice smooth, supple textures, softer acidity, and subtle, desert-influenced herbal notes like pepper and sage, which make these wines approachable yet layered.”

The region’s wine identity is also shaped by hands-on, site-driven farming. Many growers adjust practices based on soil, slope, and microclimate rather than aiming for a single style. “There’s also a shared approach to respecting the desert landscape through careful water management and low-intervention winemaking,” Dhaliwal notes, resulting in wines that reflect the nuance of the South Okanagan.

The Essential Stops



Oenophiles can make the most of their time here by planning visits around major events. Hall points to the [Okanagan Wine Festival](#) as just one of the standout examples. Held each spring and fall, this celebration connects visitors with more than 100 local wineries through tastings and vineyard tours across Okanagan communities, including Oliver and Osoyoos, offering

an immersive way to sample regional wines alongside local dishes.

For those visiting outside festival dates, Hall recommends [Phantom Creek Estates](#) in Oliver for a grand experience. By combining the estate tour with a tasting, you'll spend an hour exploring the 45,000-square-foot facility, learning about their natural and biodynamic farming practices before sampling wines on the patio.

Also in Oliver, Dhaliwal highlights [Platinum Bench Estate Winery](#) as one of her personal favorite experiences. "Set on the Black Sage Bench, the winery offers views of rolling hills and vineyards from its rustic patio, and its terroir-driven wines reflect the intensity and character of the site." She recommends the syrah. "Depending on the site, syrah in the South Okanagan can range from ripe dark fruit and spice, to more savory and structured with peppery, herbal notes, yet it consistently pairs beautifully with red meats like lamb."

[Hester Creek](#) is known for its reds like cabernet franc and merlot and whites such as chardonnay and pinot gris. The Judge is a crowd favorite, a red offering aromas of star anise, dark cherry, cocoa, and cedar, and flavors of caramel and light tobacco. Complimentary tastings of select varieties, scenic estate views, and the on-site Tuscan-style restaurant, Terrafina, complete the experience.

In Osoyoos, [LaStella Winery](#) combines Italian inspiration with South Okanagan terroir in a Tuscan-style setting overlooking Osoyoos Lake. Each wine is named after a musical term, with its flagship Maestoso "Solo" merlot a standout.

Visitors should also stop at the family-owned [Moon Curser Vineyards](#), known for its unconventional old-world grapes, including tannat, tempranillo, and dolcetto. "On any given night, you'll almost always find a bottle from Moon Curser open in our household," says Dhaliwal. "In particular, their red blend 'Dead of Night' is a go-to—approachable yet complex, with a bold, confident style that reflects Moon Curser's adventurous brand and thoughtful winemaking."