

The following are notes for a talk by Robin McNeil on the occasion of the Saanich Sommelier's 20th anniversary meeting in February 1994. For this occasion, we had invited everyone we could contact who had been members of the club since its inception – we had a great turnout and a wonderful evening.

The Saanich Sommeliers started as the result of Alan Harris and me (both of us having been members of the Coquitlam Vintners Wine Club) each moving to Vancouver Island. At that time there were already two wine-making clubs on the island – the Victoria Winemakers Guild who were very well established and the South Vancouver Island Winemakers. This latter club had not shown any enthusiasm for new members and folded shortly thereafter. For reasons lost in the mists of time, we decided that we would like to start our own club, run more along the lines of the Vancouver area clubs with which we were more familiar.

Alan had been on the Island a bit longer than I and had made some contact with local wine-makers. We invited about a dozen couples to meet at Trevor and Isabelle Jones house on February 13, 1974. The minutes of the inaugural meeting were then read.

The founding members of the club present on the 20th Anniversary were then identified:

- Robin and Alimay McNeil
- Pat and Joan Fitzsimmons
- Ken and Betty Bowness
- Trevor and Isabelle Jones
- Sally Hamill had a prior commitment and expressed profound regret she could not attend

In the 20 years, so far as I am aware there have only been six of our former members who have died: Alan and Hazel Harris, Bob Hamill, Lyn Pollok, Roy Morgan and Niels Olsen.

From these small beginnings has sprung the now strong and vibrant Saanich Sommeliers. I have been asked to pick out some highlights of the last 20 years.

In the early days the meetings were very similar to the format we follow to this day. Apart from the first few meetings, the club has always met in our Grandview Drive basement and, until not long ago was also the home for the annual crushing of the grapes. The program was generally the same mix as we have today, with the possible exception that we had more meetings with the use and pairing of wines with cooking.

At the beginning, most wines were made from concentrates or locally available fruits. Those of us brave enough to venture into the world of “real” grapes bought

them through Armando Barbon at the long gone North Douglas Delicatessen. The choice as I recall it was Zinfandel, Carrignan, Palomino or Muscat – and some knowledge of Italian helped during the crush that developed when the trucks arrived. The (manual) crusher was borrowed from North Douglas and we had a chicken-wire box that went under the crusher to act as the destemmer. If we pressed at all, it must have been using a jury-rigged mesh of some sort with no mechanical pressure.

- **1976:** The club orders over a ton of grapes and I found that my Pinto station wagon would carry 22 (36 lb) lugs – without using the roof-rack! We had a full club membership (15 couples) and were co-sponsors of the Provincial competition held in the Royal Oak Inn.
- **1977:** Already up to 2 tons of grapes and bought a manual crusher. In those days most of the crushing was done at our house and we were small enough that the “afternoon” of the crush we sat around the picnic table enjoying each others bottles and taking turns operating the machinery. Well do we remember the sticky door-knobs of that period! Club members brought home both first and second prizes from the Provincial and National competitions.
- **1978:** We buy our first club-owned Vinamat
- **1979:** First annual open club competition – only one class, California Red Table for the M & R Trophy.
- **1980:** A second class - New White Table – added to the competition
- **1981:** Two more classes added as the result of Wine Arts sponsorship.
- **1982:** 125 entries in the 4 classes of the competition. Colin Nicholson takes his truck to the Okanagan for the first time to collect grapes
- **1983:** Non-grape class added to our competition. We co-host the provincial competition with Victoria Winemakers Guild at Pearkes Arena on a VERY hot night.
- **1984:** First Octoberfest night
- **1985:** The club order consists of:
 - **3.4 tons of grapes from Spagnols**
 - **55 gallons of juice from Spagnols**
 - **1.2 tons of Okanagan grapes**
 - **0.6 tons of frozen grapes from Pebble Hill**
 - **36 cans of Australian concentrate**
- **1986:** We co-host the National competition at the Royal Oak Inn. Bill Pearson gives his (in)famous talk on sex and wine
- **1987:** Executive position of Competition Coordinator created with Peter Howe the first incumbent.
- **1988:** Competition classes doubled by adding Sparkling, White Table, Dessert and 2 beer classes

- **1989:** Added a sherry class as a memorial to Roy Morgan. First annual lamb roast at the Byers
- **1992:** BCAWA celebrates its 20th anniversary in Penticton and the Sommeliers have more people there than any other club.
- **1994:** Plans to co-host the Provincial competition – this time at the Legion on the Gorge.

The following toast was then proposed:

“Here’s to good friends made, good wines drunk – and may the next 20 years of the club be as successful as the first.”