

Biography of John Simes

Winemaker for Canada's Mission Hill Family Estate



Photo by: Brian Sprout

Born and raised in New Zealand, John Simes took a university degree in food technology and parlayed it into an exciting career in the wine business. Only fifty-five years old, Simes has already amassed an impressive list of accomplishments, including being recognized twice in five years by London's International Wine & Spirit Competition (IWSC). One of the key wine events on the industry's calendar, Simes won for wine produced in two different countries, half a world apart.

His love affair with the wine business began during a three-year journey around the world after university. He travelled to Europe, South America, the United States and Canada to learn everything he could about grape growing and winemaking. Most importantly, he met his wife Sheilagh on his travels. They spent some time

together in her native British Columbia before returning to New Zealand.

Back home, Simes answered a newspaper ad for a junior position at Montana Wines, New Zealand's best known winery. He started the job in December 1978 and was promoted to winemaker of what was then Montana's smallest winery in August of the next year. That small winery, about one third the size of Mission Hill, grew into the largest winery in New Zealand and its Sauvignon Blanc became a benchmark for wines around the world.

In 1990, Simes received his first trophy from the IWSC for producing the best Sauvignon Blanc entered in that year's competition. By 1992, he was Chief Winemaker at Montana and was responsible for setting all winemaking policy, approving all blends, managing personnel and he had overall responsibility for the operating and capital budgets.

But Simes was getting restless in New Zealand. He and his family had spent many vacations in British Columbia and had always loved the area, and they began to think about making a move. After looking around at a number of options, Simes met Mission Hill proprietor Anthony von Mandl and it became clear the two men shared a philosophy based on quality. Simes joined the Mission Hill team in 1992

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and immediately went to work on the 1992 Grand Reserve Barrel Select Chardonnay.

Amazingly, London's International Wine & Spirit Competition judged that wine the Best Chardonnay in the 1994 competition, giving Simes his second IWSC trophy in five years. He cites his double IWSC wins as the highlight of his career thus far. Bringing home the prestigious trophy in 1994 also provided immense publicity for Mission Hill and the Okanagan Valley.

As the leader of Mission Hill's grape growing and winemaking team, Simes is relentless in the pursuit of quality. He has increased the winery's vineyard estate holdings to take advantage of the valley's diverse microclimates. He uses a combination of science and intuition in the selection of grape varieties. His decision to plant imported French vines and invest in irrigation systems, frost protection and

weather stations are all designed to encourage the production of premium fruit.

At the winery, Simes has invested in new presses, expanded barrel aging and has overseen the creation of temperature controlled underground cellars to gently age the wine under optimum conditions.

John Simes is a pioneer ideally suited to the emerging Canadian industry. He and his team believe the proof is in every bottle of Mission Hill Family Estate wine, a philosophy shared with proprietor Anthony von Mandl.

