



COURTESY QUAILS' GATE ESTATE WINERY

The Quails' Gate Estate Winery features vineyards that spill down toward the shores of Lake Okanagan a quarter-mile below.

The best wines you've never tasted

Kelly J. Hayes

A few weeks back, I wrote in these pages of the role discovery plays in the world of wine.

This July, under skies choked by the smoke of raging forest fires, I visited the Okanagan Valley in central British Columbia. There I discovered not only one of the most stunningly scenic and pleasurable wine destinations in the world, but also a place that is producing an impressive array of outstanding wines despite its comparative infancy as a wine region.

These wines are so good as to cause amazement that they have not made their way onto the wine lists, into the stores and into the collective consciousness of American wine enthusiasts.

When I planned this trip to the Okanagan, a phrase uttered by my friend, Bruce Schoenfeld, the wine and spirits editor for *Travel & Leisure* magazine, kept running through my mind: "Think Napa on Lake Tahoe." He paint-

ed a picture that seemed impossible to believe but, as I discovered within an hour of driving into the valley, Bruce's description was spot-on.

I was on a cross-continental drive from New York City to Vancouver, with my friend Doug, who was moving to Vancouver. We were burdened by few responsibilities other than to make a 2 p.m. lunch at a winery called Quails' Gate. Having never tasted their wines, and being both parched and starved, I was thrilled to arrive precisely at our appointed time (after five days and 3,000 miles) to dine with Angela McManus, director of communications for Quail's Gate Estate Winery.

A long lunch

From the moment Doug and I entered the Old Vines restaurant it was clear that wine tourism was serious business in the Okanagan. The modern glass and timber dining room, accented by a bustling open kitchen, was lined with glass-paneled French doors that opened onto a patio with

views over vineyards that descended to the lakeshore, perhaps a quarter-mile below.

On this day, smoke mingled with storm clouds that eventually gave way to a torrential rain, providing drama as a side dish to an exquisite lunch and tasting. We inhaled a dozen or so Vancouver Island oysters accompanied by a crisp, 2008 Quails' Gate Chenin Blanc as Angela explained that the Stewart family, proprietors of Quails' Gate, have grown fruit in the Okanagan for more than 100 years. Legend has it that they became Canada's first commercial importer of Pinot Noir vines in 1975. We enjoyed a second course of Cortez Island Mussels and clams in a fig and cilantro broth, and listened to Angela as she explained the local geography.

The Okanagan Valley runs south to north, beginning just above the 49th parallel (the U.S.-Canada border), making it, along with Germany's Mosel, one of the northernmost serious wine regions in the world. Hot and

dusty in the south, lush and green in the north, the valley's heart and soul is 75-mile long, glacier-carved Lake Okanagan, which is both deep and narrow. Along both sides of the lake, and below it, in the desert-like southern reaches, there are myriad microclimates and soil variations that provide infinite opportunities for viticulturists to test grape varieties in different conditions.

It was close to five o'clock when the skies began to clear and we began to wrap up lunch. A red wine flight, highlighted by the 2007 Quails' Gate Pinot Noir and a 2006 Quails' Gate Old Vines Foch (Marechal Foch), both made by winemaker Grant Stanley, provided precise contrasts with Chef Roger Sleiman's Duck Confit Tagliatelle.

Napa has many fine restaurants and wineries, but the combination of Chef Sleiman's cuisine, Quails' Gate's wines and the views of Lake Okanagan may well have trumped California's charms.

Across the water

The next day's destination, CedarCreek Winery Estate, was across the lake, perhaps five miles as the crow flies from where we had lunched the previous afternoon. The morning dawned clear and hot and, as I approached the winery, I could see charred trees on the rocky hillsides above the lake. Gordon Fitzpatrick, CedarCreek's president, explained that the trees were reminders of a devastating 2003 fire that destroyed more than 200 homes and burned for weeks. It seems the Okanagan region is accustomed to fire.

CedarCreek's story was familiar. Like the Stewarts of Quails' Gate, the Fitzpatrick family had a long history in local horticulture. Ross Fitzpatrick, a former Canadian senator and Gordon's father, grew up working in the fields and packing houses of the fruit orchards. In 1986, Ross fulfilled a dream when he purchased an old fruit orchard that had more recently been planted to Merlot, Riesling and Gewürztraminer, and went into the wine business.

Twenty-plus years later the Fitzpatricks' dream has brought them two Canadian Winery of the Year honors. Today they farm four different vineyards ranging from the desert southern edge of the Okanagan, where they grow Bordeaux varietals, to their terraced hillside property on the lake that is home to Pinot Noir, Merlot and the floral Germanic aromatics.

The wines were superb, highlighted by a 2006 Cedar-Creek Ehrenfelser. The wine was bright and fragrant with a bowl full of fresh fruit flavors. A cross between the Sylvaner and Riesling grapes, CedarCreek's interpretation of Ehrenfelser is ready for a star turn.

As we tasted through the CedarCreek wines, made by winemaker Tom DiBello, whose pedigree includes both California's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Australia's Cape Mentele, Gordon related his excitement about the Okanagan wine industry.

The experimentation has just begun, he told me. While the valley has been known for fruit production since the early 1900s, fine wines, made from vinifera, the noble grapes of European extraction like Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir etc., date only to the mid-1970s. In August 2008 there were 144 licensed wineries in British Columbia, a tenfold increase since 1988.

North America's most stunning winery

The Okanagan's maturation as a wine region is perhaps epitomized by my final stop, Mission Hill Family Estate. Regarded by many as one of the most beautiful wineries in the world, Mission Hill is the embodiment of the vision of Anthony von Mandl, who made a fortune



COURTESY MISSION HILL FAMILY ESTATE

The Mission Hill winery above Lake Okanagan, anchored by a 12-story bell tower, is regarded by many as one of the most beautiful wineries in the world.

as a wine distributor and has achieved even greater riches, and a degree of fame, as the creator/owner of Mike's Hard Lemonade.

In 1981, von Mandl purchased a stunning site on the hills above the lake and set about building the best wine facility that money could buy.

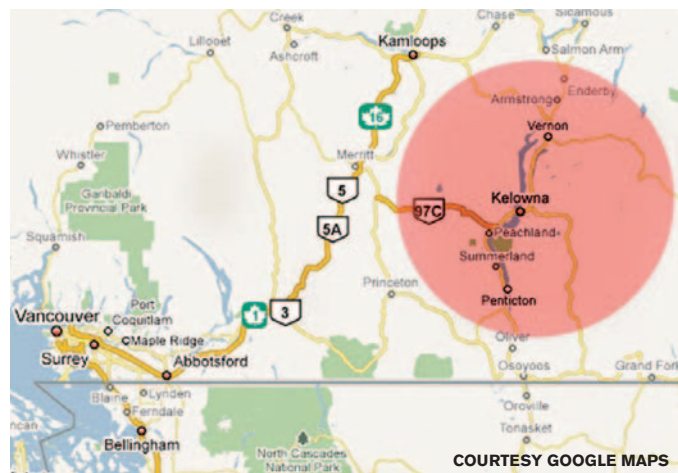
Everything in the winery itself is top of the line and the design of the structure, while imposing, blends perfectly into the surrounding landscape of volcanic hills, vines, sky and water.

The focal point, literally, of the winery is a 12-story Tuscan-inspired bell tower that features four large bells made in Annecy, France, by the Pacard Bell foundry, which also made the bells that chime in St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The Terrace features a restaurant that may have the finest view of any winery restaurant in creation, and a chef who is serious about local products, adhering religiously to a 100-kilometer circle for sourcing his ingredients. That excepts, of course, seafood that is trucked in daily from Vancouver.

I had lunch at The Terrace and tasted Mission Hill's wines with Ingo Grady, director of wine education. Ingo is as knowledgeable and passionate about the wines of the Okanagan as he is realistic about their reach. When I told him that I had tasted some of the best wines I had never tasted in the past couple of days, he explained that the wines do not reach the U.S. because, well, they sell out in Canada.

And there was the rub. The wines of the Okanagan



COURTESY GOOGLE MAPS



COURTESY CEDAR CREEK WINERY

The rose garden at Cedar Creek Winery, which grows different grapes in four vineyards scattered around the Okanagan Valley.

have the quality and character to be hits on American wine lists, but there is little incentive for the Canadians to sell them internationally. The costs of promotion, distribution and marketing, coupled with the effort required, just may not be worth it.

So where does that leave us? Wine is a universal product and the Okanagan wineries are on the cusp of great things. As they continue to get better, I hope that the region's winemakers can find a way to get their wines into the glasses of consumers who would appreciate them. The winemakers of the Okanagan have every right to sell their wares locally, but I also hope they feel an obligation to share with the world.

Until that time, if you want to taste the best wines you've never tasted, you'll just have to take a trip to the best wine region you've never visited. ☐

Kelly J. Hayes writes the WineInk column every week for the Aspen Times Weekly. WineInk took a break this week to make room for this longer piece.

Morris & Fyrwald

Sotheby's
INTERNATIONAL REALTY

TODAY'S VALUES



4 bedrooms, 3.5 baths, 11 riverfront acres
\$5,375,000



2 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, sits on 49 acres
\$3,995,000



2.6 acre lot on the Roaring Fork River
\$2,400,000



3 bedrooms, 2 baths, 1,220 sq ft
\$1,400,000 Furnished



CRAIG WARD
970.379.1254 Cell
CWard@rof.net

ASPENSKIHOMES.COM

Aspen: 415 East Hyman Avenue 970.925.6060