

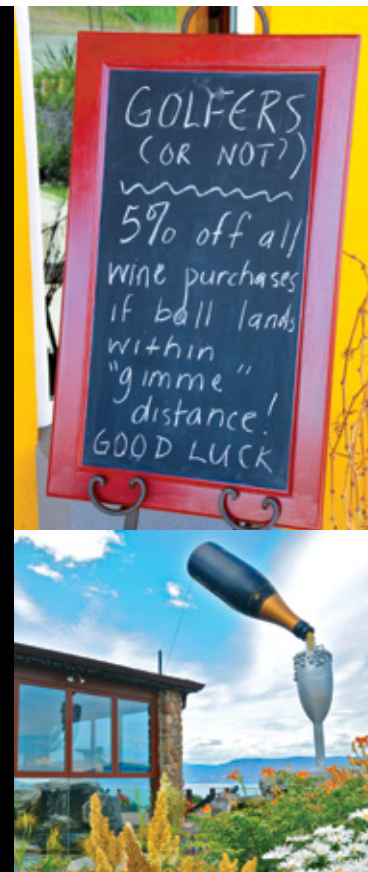


After a round on one of Kelowna's golf courses such as Predator Ridge, the wine life (opposite page) awaits:

SpierHead Winery vintner and avid golfer Bill Knutson offers an incentive for customers to chip a golf ball close to a makeshift golf hole next to the tasting room.

A giant outdoor statue pays tribute to Summerhill Pyramid Winery's own Cipes Brut sparkling wine.

And the outdoor Terrace Restaurant at Mission Hill Winery overlooks acres of vineyards and Lake Okanagan.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT KAUFMAN

The Great Wine North

by Robert Kaufman

Go ahead, call me crazy. There I was on a peaceful Saturday morning skirting around the cart paths of Harvest Golf Club, which weaves through 45 acres of fruit orchards and vineyards on the scenic hillsides overlooking Kelowna and Lake Okanagan. I was lucky the Canadian Mounties weren't chasing me down.

I would have had to plea no contest since I was laboring on two wheels, pedaling where, perhaps, no cyclists have gone before. Besides, I never noticed any signs prohibiting bikes, and I was wearing my helmet to fend off any incoming objects. For the record, however, don't try this on your home course.

After leaving unscathed, I continued on my merry way for a bike's-eye perspective of this fruit basket region in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, a place I'd always heard referred to as *Napa North* in recognition of its flourishing wine industry and landscape. While I don't consider myself resembling

anything close to a connoisseur, by the time it would take me to guzzle — I mean, sip — a glass of the fermented juice of grapes, I can leave my home in the San Francisco Bay Area and be tasting fine wines in the authentic Napa Valley. So being a bit of an oenophile, along with my appetite to discover new golf destinations, it was my professional obligation to investigate whether the Okanagan wine region could hold a cork to its world famous counterpart.

Flying into Kelowna, the aerial view provided all the earmarks of a wine-growing region: neat rows of vines stretching across miles of rolling hills. However, the 68-mile-long lake stretching through the valley between the Cascade and Coastal mountain ranges was the first clue I wasn't landing in Napa. Once on

the ground and wandering into any of the not-so-crowded tasting rooms — whether at one of the stately-looking wineries such as Mission Hill Family Estate, named one of the world's Top 5 winery restaurants by *Travel & Leisure Magazine*, or a picture-perfect boutique winery such as SpierHead, nestled next to a McIntosh apple orchard and a pumpkin patch, or even Summerhill Estate Winery, which lays claim to the largest organic vineyards in Canada and ages its wines in a four-story replica of Egypt's Great Pyramid of Cheops — it was apparent I didn't need to know the difference between a Merlot or a Cabernet to enjoy touring any of the 26 wineries in the immediate Kelowna vicinity.

By the numbers, the 100-plus wineries throughout the Okanagan Valley don't

compare to the approximately 400 of the Napa Valley, but what about quality?

Some are catching global attention, but a few more grape years will definitely enhance the area's positioning on the wine rating scorecard. On the other hand, with the pairing of 19 quality courses throughout the region, Kelowna is perfectly aged for golf trippers.

Located on the northernmost end of the Sonora Desert (the south end is in Northwest Mexico), the valley has a semi-arid climate. And because it also offers more than 2,000 hours of sunshine annually, I was warned if I ever decide to move to Kelowna to "be prepared to pay the sunshine tax."

I'd imagine the 115,000 residents of Kelowna have that covered and may want something to say about encouraging new

squatters who might disturb the rural charm of their community. Fortunately, as a haven for year-round recreational activities and superb urban amenities, the locals are extremely warm and welcoming to visitors, clearly evident when the population swells to more than 180,000 during the peak summer season.

As one of Canada's pre-eminent golf destinations, it is little wonder the sport plays a major role in the visitor influx. Enhancing the experience is the fact that courses are clustered around the wineries and within 40 minutes of one another.

Within the Kelowna region, the farthest courses away from downtown are at the *Official Summer Home of Hockey Canada* — also known as Predator Ridge Resort.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT KAUFMAN

With The Predator Course having hosted the Telus World Skins Game twice and The Ridge Course voted Canada's Best New Golf Course for 2010 by *SCOREGolf Magazine*, this resort community was an outstanding selection.

If blasting balls off elevated tees raises your thrill threshold, the 7,190-yard Doug Carrick-designed Ridge Course is right in your wheelhouse, taking rock-solid advantage of the area's natural topography. It's a layout composed of dramatic elevation shifts with the first *wow* highlight coming at the 244-yard par-3 No. 5 hole, where you're tested to hit a wide-open green 100 feet below.

Breathtaking views of Lake Okanagan along with the comfortably wide playing corridors helped keep my golf ball supply intact and made The Ridge Course very playable for my recreational game, whereas the

adjacent Les Furber-designed Predator Course (opened in 1991), offers a bit higher difficulty factor with elevated greens and links-style bunkering.

Back up the valley toward Kelowna, I managed to "temporarily" bypass the vintage thirst stops along the way to Gallaghers Canyon, a 6,802-yard course designed by Bill Robinson and cut throughout mountainous terrain lined with groves of ponderosa pines. After getting the No. 1 handicap hole out of the way on the opener, the remainder of the round proved to be downhill ... then uphill ... then some more downhill, the whole time challenging with uneven lies for those who can hit the fairways.

Someone who did hit it right was Stan Tower, a longtime Kelowna rancher and visionary. During the golf-building boom

of the early 2000s throughout this fertile valley, he started transforming his 1,200 acres of cattle-grazing land into a residential community that would also include 18 holes of golf. In 2008, his dream became a 7,212-yard reality with the stamping of his own name on The Club at Tower Ranch.

Since Tower was familiar with moving cattle and not shaping fairways, he brought in designer Thomas McBroom to take advantage of this rugged setting. And McBroom did just that, offering up a blood-pumping challenge requiring some bold shotmaking in the face of distraction by spectacular panoramic views of Lake Okanagan and the city of Kelowna.

Hole for hole and bottle for bottle, Kelowna is irrefutably a golf destination worth every chip and sip (and cycle). Welcome to the Great Wine North. **FG**