

What's NEW on the Okanagan Food & Wine Scene

by Jennifer Cockrall-King

I'm working on a new book project this spring that won't come out until spring 2016. It's called *Food Artisans of the Okanagan Valley*, and I'm spending a fair amount of time touring the main streets and back roads of food and wine country, ferreting out what's new and exciting. (Someone has to do this job.)

But you don't want to wait until next spring, do you? Of course not. Neither do I. So why don't I share my newest discoveries with you, as a sort of sneak peek? And writing about the food side of life in the Okanagan is thirsty work. Here are the latest notable new wine, beer, spirits and food ventures that have sprung up. Let's start in the north and work our way south.

VERNON AND LAKE COUNTRY

Okanagan Spirits (okanaganspirits.com) launched over a decade ago with its world-class eau-de-vie, fruit brandy, vodka, gin, grappa, aquavit and absinthe. But it now makes an elegant single malt, and has a fancy whisky lounge and a tasting room with a 27 ft. bar in its distillery headquarters in downtown Vernon as of January.

50th Parallel Winery (50thparallel.com) in Lake Country opened its gorgeous new winery and tasting room in 2014 to much buzz because of wine maker Grant Stanley's excellent pinot noirs and pinot noir rosés. *Main Photo: The stunning view from 50th Parallel Estate, photo by Colin Jewell.*

KELOWNA

This town seems to be exploding with swanky new tasting rooms and places to eat and drink. **Salted Brick** (saltedbrick.com) opened in 2014 and the ploughman's lunch, a mere \$11 for all that local cheese and house-made charcuterie, is a steal. It also serves bubbly on tap.

An interesting new restaurant has just opened called **The Curious** (thecurious.ca) with a unique menu – in the best way – and good wood-fired pizzas.

Micro Bar Bites (microkelowna.com) opened at the very end of 2013, and is a 900 sq. ft. wine-cocktail-craft beer bar by the same team at RauDZ Regional Table, just a few doors away. Micro has interesting local wines by the glass and wine-friendly tapas such as marinated mushrooms and risotto fritters.

By the time this issue hits newsstands, the doors will have swung open to **Pilgrim & Pearl**, (pilgrimandpearl.com). Clearly the owners mean business when it comes to martinis, classic cocktails and an oyster bar. They reportedly put \$1 million into Pilgrim & Pearl and its sister property next door, **27** (twentysevenkelowna.com). 27 promises to be an eclectic lounge where local cocktail guru Gerry Jobe will preside over elixirs, bitters, reductions and spir-its, perhaps heralding the return of the Tiki Lounge, with a Kelowna flavour.

Tree Brewing opened its Beer Institute (treebrewingbeerinstitute.com) in late summer 2014 with its keg-to-glass unfiltered craft beer, beer education, and beer-inspired food, such as pretzels made with spent grains served with ale honey mustard.

Sandhill (sandhillwines.ca) has gone all-in on its single vineyard winemaking philosophy, which you can now experience via flat screen TV in a highly polished tasting room and an impressive and expansive winery tasting lounge that opened in May 2014. Some of the tasting programs need to be booked in advance.

WEST KELOWNA

Sumac Ridge (sumacridge.com) revealed a beautiful new tasting room and facility facelift after rebranding its different wine lines – Sumac Ridge, Black Sage Vineyards and Stellar's Jay – into its own unique labels.

Last fall, **Mission Hill Family Estate Winery** (missionhillwinery.com) released its Terroir Collection of premium, small lot, single-vineyard wines, which are only available from the winery.

SUMMERLAND

Here are a couple of wine trends that are worth noting. There are a handful of Okanagan garagiste wine makers making great wines in micro-lots, many without a winery. Another trend is "natural wine" – a vaguely defined movement towards organic and biodynamic, low interference, unfiltered and minimal additives. Summerland's **Tyler Hariton Wines** (thwines.com) are both garagiste and natural, making them highly sought after in his new galley tasting room in an industrial park.

PENTICTON

Now this is what I call progress. Farmers' Markets in BC are now allowed to sample and sell alcoholic beverages. **Penticton Farmers' Market** (pentictonfarmersmarket.org) paved the way with beer, liquor and wine vendors starting July last year, and this trend will likely spread to other markets in 2015.

Bad Tattoo Brewing Company (badtattoobrewing.com) opened in July 2014 and quickly became Penticton's busiest patio and brewpub.

NARAMATA

The Grape Leaf Café (360 Robinson Avenue; no website) is the new spot in Naramata village for big breakfasts, lunch comfort foods and cappuccinos, done right.

They say that great wine is made mostly in the field, so while **Deep Roots Winery** (deeprootswinery.com) is new, it's no surprise that its wines are great. The Hardmans are in their fourth generation of fruit growing in the deep clay soils of the Naramata Bench. And I'm tickled pink and amber – sparkling gamay rosés and chardonnay bruts respectively – about **Bella Wines** (bellawines.ca), dedicated exclusively to bubbly. The tasting room opened this spring.

Legend Distillery (legendedistilling.com), also new in 2014, is dangerously close to my house and has a lovely tasting room. Let's just say that I'm now never out of craft gin or vodka.

OKANAGAN FALLS

Something's happening in Okanagan Falls, hitherto a bit of a drive-by location. Then last spring, **Liquidity** (liquiditywines.com) opened its excellent new bistro and winery with views of the south Okanagan landscape that should be hanging in the Louvre. **Painted Rock** (paintedrock.ca) winery also upgraded from an ATCO trailer as a wine shop to an ultra-modern tasting room and patio befitting its cult-status wines.



Painted Rock Winery, photo by Carey Tarr Photography.



Celebrity judges at the Naramata Bench Tailgate Party including Calgary's own Shelley Boettcher crouched in the front.



Tailgate night shot, photos by Naramata Bench Wineries Assoc.



Micro Bar Bites, Amy greets the first guests. Photo by David McIvrade, Spatula Media and Communications.

EVENTS

While there are an ever-growing number of great association and winery events in the valley, here are a few top picks. Book or buy tickets early as many of them sell out weeks, even months, in advance.

MARCH 7:

Vertical & Vintages, Apex Mountain Resort and the Naramata Bench Wineries Association apexresort.com/activities-events/verticalandvintages

APRIL 10 & 11:

Penticton Fest-of-Ale fest-of-ale.bc.ca

APRIL 30 TO MAY 10:

Spring Wine Festival – events throughout the Okanagan thewinefestivals.com

JULY 11:

Similkameen Wineries Association BBQ King competition similkameenwine.com/events

AUGUST 7 TO 9:

The Mile High Wine & Music Event at Silverstar Mountain Resort skisilverstar.com/events/silver-star-wine-and-food-festival

SEPTEMBER 12:

Naramata Tailgate Party naramatabench.com/calendars/tailgate-party-2015/

SEPTEMBER 13:

Small Guys Wine Festival garagistenorth.com

SEPTEMBER 25 & 26:

Hopscoth Whisky, Beer, Spirits Festival, Kelowna hopscothfestival.com/kelowna

OCTOBER 1 TO 11:

Fall Wine Festival – events through the Okanagan thewinefestivals.com

SUMMER AND FALL:

Tinhorn Creek Concert Series tinhorn.com/concerts

SUMMER AND FALL:

Mission Hill Concert Series missionhillwinery.com

OLIVER AND OSOYOOS

A Joy Road (joyroadcatering.com) al fresco dinner at God's Mountain Estate is a must-do dinner for any food and wine lover. The set menus are Okanagan terroir in its purest, most delicious form, from the foraged foods of the day to the top wines of the valley. Dates for the dinners are announced in early spring and by June spots at dinner are mostly sold out.

Covert Farms (covertfarms.ca) is a picturesque organic farm, U-pick, winery and vineyard at the foot of McIntyre Bluff. Last summer, Covert unveiled its Signature Series Experience farm tour. Explore the property in the back of a 1952 Mercury truck and take in the perfect blend of South Okanagan history, geology, local culture, and tastings from the fields and wines.

Lastly, watch for the opening of Okanagan wine country pioneer Harry McWatters' newest venture: his **Encore Vineyard** (encorevineyards.ca) 25,000 sq. ft. custom crush and tasting centre, opening summer 2015 on the Black Sage Bench. It will be the new home of **Time Estate Winery** (timewinery.com) and the **McWatters Collection** (harrymcwatters.com).

The valley's cocktail scene erupted a few years ago at RauDZ Regional Table when Gerry Jobe was the restaurant's "liquid chef." Jobe got the field-to-glass thing going and now there are a dozen chefs in the valley in the #okanagancocktailmovement cabal. Find them with that hashtag on Twitter. ♣

Jennifer Cockrall-King is the founder of the Okanagan Food & Wine Writers Workshop (September 11-13, 2015; foodwinewriters.com). In early 2016 Touchwood Editions will publish her newest book, Food Artisans of the Okanagan Valley. Find Jennifer at foodgirl.ca.

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