

The Rhone less travelled

The Okanagan Valley in Canada is fast earning a reputation for its winemaking, which looks set to rival some of North America's most established vineyards.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY Tanya Cooper

Where is the heart of winemaking in North America? Is it in California's Napa Valley, which was introduced to grapes in the 18th century when Spanish missionaries planted vineyards to produce wine for Mass? Is it most vibrant in the ever-popular Sonoma County, with its maritime breezes and coastal fog? How about Washington, with its shrub-steppe? No. No. And no.

These are all praiseworthy destinations, but an increasing number of visitors are seeking out a place that, until a few years ago, wine lovers had never heard of: the Okanagan Valley in the southern interior of British Columbia,

Canada. You could call it the northernmost wine area in the world. You could also call it Napa meets Palm Springs meets Narnia – a mix of crystalline mountain lakes, lush green forests, pillowy hills and vine-strangled farms. The locals wittily call it the Rhone less travelled. It's all the motivation I need to come in search of a world of wine.

Kelowna, the beating heart of the Okanagan, is a place where everyone needs a vineyard. Father Pandosy, the first settler, started the craze back in 1859 at the Oblate Mission while making sacramental wine, with early pioneers digging a little deeper to cultivate the



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province's volcanic terrain. Impressed, local farmers changed tack and started planting their own vineyards in the 1920s, converting forests that were once characterised by orchards of apples, peaches and pears.

In the end, the Okanagan has become the most planted, primped and preened patchwork valley in western Canada. Bumper-to-bumper vineyards flourish, from pokey farmhouses where Ma and Pa will sell you a Pinot Noir they've just bottled in their kitchen, to fantasy estates with pyramid-shaped cellars and bell towers.

And everywhere are vineyards, their names somehow talismanic and enigmatic: Phantom Creek, Hidden Terrace, Ancient Hill. In parts, the topography reminds me of a Spaghetti Western.

But Kelowna's vineyards were, and still are, always about more than just wine. They tell stories not only of grapes and grains, but also of farm-fork to table-fork dining – hardly a new concept in these parts – as well as tales of homegrown industry and immigration to the interior of British Columbia. All the melancholic, historical romance of Canada can be found among the fruit.

PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION?

The first story I learn is at Quails' Gate (quailsgate.com), a Pinot Noir and Chardonnay house in West Kelowna. It was founded by the Stewarts, a family of horticulturalists from County Kildare in Ireland, who came to seek their fortune and settled in 1908. An original log cabin remains on site, supposedly built on top of a rattlesnake den, and can be toured as part of a delicious wine-tasting visit.

"We're getting geeky," says chief winemaker Nikki Callaway, when we meet on a glorious morning. She's explaining her latest viticulture

project, with her head poking in and out of a gigantic stainless steel wine vat. It's empty of course, but she's looking for something inside, perhaps divine inspiration. "We're experimenting with the best French burgundies to see how they cope with the BC terroir (the natural environment in which wine is made); there is a virtue in producing the best that your land can give you."

It's a virtue Quails' Gate has in spades. When President Obama visited Canada on a state visit in his inaugural year, he picked out a 2008 Stewart reserve vintage. Or so the story goes. Everyone here has a good story. ➔



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SMALL TOWN CHARM

Kelowna Mayor **COLIN BASRAN** shares his favourite local haunts.

SWING VOTE

One of the many outdoor sports I love is golf. Kelowna (golfkelowna.com) has world-class championship courses for the serious golf lover, as well as recreational courses for those new to the game. Most have great mountain and lake views that showcase the area's beautiful, natural environment.

SOCIAL DIARY

As the weather gets warmer, there are free performances in parks around the city each week for Parks Alive (parksalive.festivalskelowna.com). It's an inexpensive way to see amazing local talent. I'm also looking forward to the return of our outdoor Farmers and Crafters Market (kelownafarmersandcraftersmarket.com).

SUMMER NIGHTS

My wife and I have two young children and we live close to Okanagan Lake. One of our favourite things to do during summer is load the kids into the wagon, along with our small portable barbecue and drive to one of the lakeside parks nearby to have dinner. The kids love it and we have a great time dining outdoors and going for swims.

CANADA'S MOST VISITED WINERY

Amid the birds and butterflies of the vineyards, I cross over to Kelowna's eastern lakeshore to Summerhill Pyramid Winery (summerhill.bc.ca) to meet Ezra Cipes, the bespectacled, tousle-haired CEO. His story is far newer, beginning back in 1986, when his family moved from New York with the dream of crafting a plot of land into Canada's largest organic vineyard.

"The Okanagan terroir is so diverse you can travel from Bordeaux to burgundy to champagne," he says, describing the vast range of wines that are now produced in the valley. "We're like a young teenager that needs to grow up and

find our identity, our best grape appellation. That's why the world doesn't understand us yet." That fuzzy understanding is further muddled, in my mind, by a crisp glass of sparkling cuvee and a brilliant sun beating down on my brow.

What has helped make Summerhill the most visited winery in Canada is its pyramid, a fused frame of wood and concrete that dominates the whole vineyard. In truth, it's an imperfect wine cellar – it's not humidity-controlled and has a fluctuating temperature – but in all the winery's blind taste tests the pyramid-aged vintages triumph time and again. The overwhelming sensory perception is that they taste brighter, fresher and younger. I couldn't agree more.

THE RISK-TAKERS

All of this fertile terroir has encouraged a certain type of risk-taker to move into the surrounding neighbourhood. Characters like master winemaker Howard Soon of Sandhill Estate Winery (sandhillwines.ca), who has been in the valley for 35 years. Andy and Leo Gebert, two Swiss brothers who run St Hubertus Estate Winery (st-hubertus.bc.ca) with their wives, also sisters. Or Den and Pat Dulik, two 70-year-olds who still come into the Tantalus Vineyards (tantalus.ca) every day to drive the tractor and tie the vine stems.

"Pat's the fastest tier," says Jane Hatch, as we tour the orchard she now manages. "No one can keep up with her." Hatch's story brought her to the Okanagan in 2005 when there were only 135 wineries. Fast forward a decade, and

that number has exploded to 260, an almost unthinkable transition from contender to serious wine player.

Overlooking Father Pandosy's original vineyard, the view of Lake Kelowna from the Tantalus tasting room is horizon busting and imagination boosting. There is an abundance of orchard fruits: peaches, apples, nectarines. Elderflower is everywhere, as are earl leaf and balsamroot. The few wine-sipping tourists aren't the only visitors. "Wild deer, coyote and weasels can all be spotted," says Hatch, "along with California quail, red-winged blackbirds, western bluebirds and eagles." Not that I see any of them. I'm distracted by an exquisite glass of Riesling. "There is a real sense of place in our wines," she adds. "Everything here, from the soil to the air, you can taste." ➔

SUMMERHILL
PYRAMID WINERY

ST. HUBERTUS
ESTATE WINERY

tantalus vineyards



STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

My final stop takes me a grape's throw away to Mission Hill (missionhillwinery.com), the valley's Rolls-Royce winery and an architectural masterpiece.

It has a Greco-Roman style, with a chiming 12-storey bell tower but it could be a Spanish monastery or Tuscan hilltop retreat. The building has a cycloid curve, replicating the cupola of the Pantheon in Rome, a mediaeval-style wine tasting Estate Room, all oak wood and splintered light, plus an open-air Greek amphitheatre that spills across its front courtyard. It wouldn't be out of place in Game of Thrones. Beneath all this, hidden to the eye and

blasted from volcanic rock, is a Benedictine-style wine cellar. You can be a teetotaler and still walk away with a loose, dropped jaw.

"The wine should come to you, so you can describe what you feel and taste," says director of wine education Ingo Grady, who leads me through my final wine tasting of the day. "Focus on the pleasure, not on the label that someone gives it." The Sauvignon Blanc on the palate reminds me of lemon drops, lemongrass and lime zest. The next has a taste of crisp pear, key lime and mango, while a sweeter final glass of ice wine has hints of wild cherry, dark raisin and damson plum. I decide to buy a couple of bottles.

GOOD WINE NEEDS NO BUSH

Listening to these winemakers talk about how the valley's terroir imbibes a different flavour into each wine appellation – rare granite soils, volcanic rock or chalk each give a different nuance to the grapes – it feels like they are pulling me into an atlas of wine. I am thrilled I can join them. If just a little tipsy.

Later in the day, I go for a walk on the Kettle Valley Rail Trail (kettlevalleyrailtrail.com) high above Kelowna to clear my head. The lake shimmers and shines in the sun, crayoned-blue like a lake drawn by a child. As far as I can see there

is nothing but armies of thick pines, clear waters running from waterfalls and rivers full of fish. The odd bear may even be padding around in the meadows.

What makes Kelowna so special has less to do with the vineyards than how they feel. The Okanagan Valley doesn't yet act like wine areas elsewhere. People don't do serious here. They are modest and free-spirited and have yet to be burdened by rushed tour buses. Everything is a little more rustic, a little more familial. The road less travelled passes right through here. The locals like it that way. And that's worth raising a glass to. ■

Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Canadian Dollar
US\$1 = 1.23 CAD

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit cic.gc.ca for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
The Okanagan Valley comes to life in summer from June to September. Temperatures hit the high 20s, Kelowna turns into a beach resort while the vineyards and orchards are in full bloom. A number of wine festivals are also held then.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines flies 28 times weekly from Singapore to Seoul, from where you can catch a connecting flight to Vancouver. From Vancouver, you can catch another connecting flight to Kelowna.

MORE INFORMATION
tourismkelowna.com

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