

Get lost and happy in Okanagan wine country

Over 50 B.C. wineries in four days. Are you up for it?

By Mari Kane

The Okanagan Valley has finally begun to embrace its inner Napa. In the past seven years, the area often referred to as BC's fruit basket has gone from 60 to 133, with a further 24 license applications currently in process. Over 50 tasting rooms are open and pouring their new releases, making spring the best time to purchase soon-to-be rare limited-edition bottles.

B.C. wines struggled for years to gain the respect of international wine snobs, but that situation has turned around in a big way over the past 10 years. Carol Nelson at BC Tourism says that the demand for local juice still exceeds supply.

"Wine consumption in BC has grown overall by 29% in the past 5 years, yet consumption of BC wine grew by 32%," she says. "That means BC wines are leading in terms of sales in BC."

The reason for this is that, quite simply, Okanagan wines have never been better. Last year, the wine world shook when **Jackson Triggs** 2004 Proprietor's Grand Reserve Shiraz won the Rosemount Trophy for Best Shiraz at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London, England. Bottles of it are now nowhere to be found.

Calvin Des Chene is the sommelier at downtown Vancouver's O'Doul's Restaurant and Bar, where BC wines featured prominently. He says the continual improvement in B.C. wine's are a result of experienced varietal placement, vineyard management, and vine maturity.

"And with the influx of talented winemakers into BC, combined with this better fruit quality, the quality of wines has steadily improved. I don't think we're peaking yet."

Although the Okanagan is planted with mostly vinifera grapes, a European grape mostly cultivated for winemaking there are still lots of unpronounceable hybrids to check out. Crisp whites such as Auxerrios, Siegerrebe, Lemberger and Ehrenfelser will slap your palate to attention and reds like Gamay Noir, Blaufrankisch, Maréchal Foch and Zweigelt are sure to put a twist in your tongue.

Okanagan wineries are all about diversity. In the time it takes your car's air conditioning to kick in, travelers can drive between a winery that's an architectural wonder (i.e. Mission Hill) and a modest-looking but entirely respectable suburban garage to taste wine. And even the smallest operation might have a sandwich bar, so you'll never go hungry.

For newcomers to the valley, Nelson suggests attending the spring and fall wine festivals.

"You get all these different wineries under one roof and you can find out which wineries you want to visit," she says.

This year's Spring Wine Fest runs May 3 – 6, and includes a 40-winery Bacchanalia at the Penticton Lakeside Resort.

DesChene's favourite winery visits are Quails' Gate, for its log cabin tasting room, Lake Breeze for the patio, and Burrowing Owl, where no expense is spared on its amazing facility.

"The most educational tour is the self-guided walkabout at Tinhorn Creek," he adds.

Here is my idea of the perfect long weekend in the Okanagan. It includes 4 days, 3 nights, visits to 6-10 wineries per day, and enough wine to make experts out of neophytes. Be sure to bring a teetotaler, because a designated driver is essential.

Kelowna

Driving to Kelowna is a four-hour trip. If you don't have a car, or lack the desire to bring one, it's easy to hop a flight into Kelowna International Airport and rent a car.

From Kelowna, go north on Hwy 97 for your most northerly excursion into Lake Country. Go to **Grey Monk** for the kind of aromatic whites this cooler region does best: Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Riesling.

After a visit to **Arrowleaf Cellars**, you will be southward bound for the next four days. Pass through Kelowna and head to the **Summerhill Pyramid Winery** for their organically grown Brut sparkling. Continue down Chute Lake Road to **St Hubertus** and **Cedar Creek**. Stop at **Tantalus Vineyards** (by appointment) and you will have done Kelowna's east side.

Cross back over the floating bridge to the town of Westbank, where the wineries are so close you could almost walk between them. The view from **Mission Hill's** Terrace café makes dodging the tour buses worth the effort. You can meander through the monasterial courtyard while deciding whether to take their

tour. If not, snap some photos and head down to **Little Straw** and **Mount Boucherie** for their Pinots and Gamays. Down the road, the new **Rollingdale Winery** is open by appointment. Finish the day over dinner in the Old Vines Restaurant at **Quails Gate Winery**. After all that wine, a frothy beer might be in order.

Penticton

Begin each day with a sharp, citric breakfast wine, or better yet, bubbly. On day two, drive south to **Sumac Ridge Estate Winery** for a flute of Brut and an omelet in their Cellar Door Bistro. Fortify well, as it is time for a decision. Whether to check out the Summerland wineries – **Dirty Laundry, Thornhaven, Sonoran Estate, Calliope** and **Adora** - or head straight to the Naramata Bench.

With over 14 wineries on the ten-mile bench and only one narrow road winding in or out, Naramata has more than enough tasting rooms to occupy an afternoon. Picnicking is encouraged at **Lang, Lake Breeze** and **Red Rooster**, and fine cheeses are found at **Poplar Grove**. Check out old timers **Kettle Valley, La Frenz** and **Nichol**, as well as newer shops like **Township 7, Therapy, Laughing Stock, Mistral** and the brand new **D'Angelo's**.

The question is: where do you want to be at closing time? I suggest the Barrel Room Bistro at **Hillside Estates**, where the view from the bell tower will inspire you to work off your meal climbing it.

Oliver

Have a big breakfast and say goodbye to the mighty Okanagan. Say hello to Skaha Lake, which will guide you into Okanagan Falls. There, you can choose among **Hawthorn Mountain, Blasted Church, Wild Goose** and **Stags Hollow**, all with terrific views of the valley.

By afternoon, you'll roll into the desert town of Oliver faced with another quandary: Golden Mile or Black Sage Bench. Welcome to the "Wine Capital of Canada." Here at the top of the Sonora Desert is where you'll find the rich Bordeaux-style reds that thrive in the dry heat.

The Golden Mile offers easy winery hopping along Highway 97. Start at **Fairview Cellars** (by appointment) and proceed to **Tinhorn Creek, Gehringer Bothers, Hester Creek, Domaine Combret, Golden Mile, Inniskillin Okanagan** and a new winery called **Golden Beaver**.

Black Sage Bench wineries are somewhat farther apart. Heading south on Number Nine Road you'll find **Silver Sage** and the new **Oliver Twist Winery**. Dodging the tumbling tumbleweeds, follow Black Sage Road to **Black Hills Estates, Desert Hills**, and the newly-opened **Quita Ferrara Winery**, until finally arriving at **Burrowing Owl**. Dinner reservations at the Owl's Sonora Room Restaurant are highly recommended, as it might be your only chance to taste their most limited wines.

Keremeos

The fourth day begins at aboriginal-owned **Nk'Mip Cellars** in desert-like Osoyoos. Pronounced "Inkameep," the winery is part of an Osoyoos band development that includes a golf course, resort, spa and campground. Lunch is served on the patio with a spectacular view of Osoyoos Lake.

Heading home via the Similkeen Valley means cutting back through Osoyoos, and taking Hwy 3 over the mountains toward Keremeos. Near Cawston, stop at **Herder, Crowsnest** and **Orofino Vineyards**. Near the town of Keremeos, you'll find **St. Laszlo Estate Winery**, formerly known as Keremeos Vineyards, the oldest producer in the valley.

If you were able to stop at 53 wineries in four days – congratulations! You are a true wine warrior. Even if you hit only half of these tasting rooms, you'll be more of an authority than most Vancouverites.

Cheers!