



WORDS ELISABETH KING

STRIKING IT LUCKY IN CANADA'S OKANAGAN VALLEY

SOME places seem to have won the geographic lottery. Gold prospectors descended on Canada's Okanagan Valley in the late 1850s and homesteaders planted the first orchards in what was to become British Columbia's most important fruit-growing region later in the century. But it wasn't until the 1980s that the Big Valley broke through as a premium wine region, following an earlier incarnation as cheap plonk country. Today more than 125 wineries dot a lush landscape that's also blessed with sparkling lakes, rolling hills and surprisingly hot summers for the Great Lone Land.

I first visited the Okanagan in early spring when the trees that account for 98 per cent of BC's apple crop were looking kinda bare. It's far better to plan a visit for early summer when the sunshine is almost guaranteed for an al fresco lunch at the Terrace Restaurant at Mission Hill Family Estate Winery. One of the oldest and largest wineries in the 200km-long valley, Antony Von Mandl, a Vancouver wine merchant bought the property in the early '80s and built the gorgeous Italianate-cum-modernist complex overlooking Okanagan Lake. Just the view to do justice to Mission Hill's Oculus wine, a Bordeaux-style blend that is rated as the area's premium bottling.

If the wines can be sublime, so is the scenic drive. Stretching from West Kelowna, the Okanagan's wine-growing territory extends to the northern part of the Sonoran Desert, where locals warn you to be on the lookout for rattlesnakes and scorpions. Route 97 takes you past a series of glistening lakes chock-full of fish and anglers, zig-zagging uphill through twee-sounding settlements such as Peachland and Summerland peopled by inhabitants so friendly you'll feel like a long-lost relative.

Before starting out, drop by at Summerhill Pyramid Winery in Kelowna. You can't miss the entrance overshadowed by a huge sculpture of a wine bottle. Founded in 1987 by Stephen Cipes, a New York real estate developer, Summerhill boasts that it was the

first certified biodynamic winery in British Columbia. Wines are "clarified" inside a giant pyramid said to "amplify the spirit of the wine". Who knows but the 2012 Tiferet red costing a cool \$100 certainly lives up to the glamorous setting of the Sunset Organic Bistro where chef Jesse Croy cooks up modern Canadian dishes like prawn and chorizo fettuccine and Yarrow Meadows duck confit.

Tinhorn Creek Vineyards near Oliver was named after a panhandler's stream which criss-crosses the property. Dead-centre of the area known as the Golden Mile because

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of its numerous fruit farms and vineyards, Tinhorn Creek offers self-guided tours and claims that it was the first premium winery in British Columbia to use Stelvin screw caps for all of its wines.

Gewurztraminer, pinot gris, pinot noir and muscat plantings are the most plentiful on the surrounding hillsides but by far the biggest draw is the Miradoro restaurant, a huge glass capsule cantilevered over the South Okanagan Valley. The menu follows a modern country theme with a difference, with listings such as Wild Boar Bacon Carbonara and Albacore Tuna and Sweetbreads. Currently celebrating its 20th anniversary, the Tinhorn label to pack in your suitcase is the Oldfield Series Pinot Noir. There's also a demonstration vineyard where the guide allows you to pick a grape and then offers a sip of the same varietal.

If you visit the Okanagan at the height of

the August fruit and vegetable harvest, the melons and tomatoes picked out of hand remind you of how our products used to taste before the era of pre-packaging and artificial ripening. Covert Farms, also near Oliver, is a 100 per cent certified organic fruit and vegetable farm which ships melons, strawberries and tomatoes all over western Canada. The owners, Gene and Kelly Covert, allow visitors to pick their own and joke that if you can pick 250 kilos of tomatoes they will give you a watermelon for free.

Many old timers in the Okanagan Valley are afraid that the orchards and row crops could become a memory as more and more land is turned over to more profitable grape-growing. Troy and Sara Harker are fifth-generation fruit growers and have built a thriving business making fruit wines at Harker's Organics. The sparkling apple wines have attracted the biggest fan following. But the mulberry-pear dessert wine aged in French oak is a global one-off and surprisingly "meaty" for a fruit wine.

The Harkers aren't the only family carving out a niche. Thirteen years ago, Vancouver couple Kim Stansfield and John Gordon decided on a tree change after visiting the Napa Valley and planted a vineyard in Summerland at Valentine Farm. Instead of making wine, the enterprising duo set up a gourmet vinegar business called The Vinegar Works. In addition to showing visitors how to use vinegar in desserts and cocktails, like Maggie Beer in the Barossa, they do a roaring trade in verjus. You can stay on the property, too, in the private suite.

Artisanal cheeses anyone? You'll have to drive to the east side of Okanagan Lake to Penticton. Transplanted Brit Gavin Miller of Upper Bench Estate Winery makes first-rate pinot noirs and merlots tailor-made for his wife Shana's cheeses. The Nova Scotia native converted a grape-pressing pad to cheese-making and has never looked back. You might do so wistfully after sampling her brine-washed Okanagan Sun soft-ripened cheese or King Cole blue.