

Supreme wines: Canada's Okanagan Valley

CANADA'S SEDUCTIVE WINE COUNTRY IS ITS BEST-KEPT SECRET

It's funny how preconceptions can persist. Mention wine and most people will probably conjure up countries like France or Italy, where the tradition of winemaking goes back centuries, or one of the big-name new world producers like California, Australia and Chile. Mention Canada and wine doesn't usually make it onto the radar. And when it does, it's usually the ice wine variety. While the superb wine produced in this northern land isn't news to folks here, the secret is finally getting out beyond our borders.

Here in British Columbia, the westernmost province, the Okanagan Valley is premium wine country. Nestled between the Cascade and Monashee mountain ranges, the valley stretches from the edge of the US border northward for about 160 kilometers. The beautiful vistas of low, rolling hills and scattered

oblong lakes were the workings of receding glaciers more than 10,000 years ago. The soil that was left behind is ideal for growing vinifera grapes and a whole host of other fruit that fill the valley's picturesque orchards. This may be the north but don't think northern climes, because the Okanagan is blessed with long hot and dry summers.

In early October, the entire region is in a celebratory mood with its annual fall wine festival that is timed to coincide with the autumnal harvest. And there is definitely something to celebrate in these parts. The wine industry is booming. There are more than 70 wineries scattered around the valley, though it's hard to keep track of the exact number as new ones have emerged regularly over the past few years. Okanagan wines also boast a slew of

international awards, including Jackson-Triggs' win for best Syrah/Shiraz at the 2006 International Wine and Spirits Competition in London, a first for a North American winery.

Rewind a few decades and such a feat wouldn't have been possible. A real newcomer compared to most wine-producing regions of the world, the first commercial winery in the Okanagan opened almost eight decades ago. But the wines made then were nothing to boast about. In fact, it has only been in the last 15 years or so that the region's wineries have really had any bragging rights at all. In the late '80s, the free trade agreement with the United States spurred the removal of less desirable grapes and the subsequent planting of premium vinifera.

Oh, how things have changed since then! There





Jackson-Triggs



Inniskillin

are a wide range of grape varieties grown here, from Auxerrois to Zinfandel and a whole host of others in between. A microcosm of this country's multiculturalism, today Okanagan wines are a mix of old world and new world techniques, knowledge and wine makers, who might hail from the town next door or from such far away places as Hungary, France or Germany. As a result, wine styles vary greatly from one estate to the next.

Naramata, located just outside the city of Penticton, and the stretch to the south between Oliver and Osoyoos, known for its Golden Mile, are the two areas with a particularly high concentration of wineries. They also see a huge number of wine touring visitors. Not surprising since you can sip some great vintages all the while enjoying breathtakingly beautiful scenery. While throngs of wine lovers descend on these parts of the Okanagan Valley during the region's spring, summer, fall and icewine festivals, they are very popular winery tour destinations from May through October, so much so that several wineries have decided to remain open to the public year-round. By car, by bus, by bike or by thumb, open a good bottle of wine, and they will come.

The southernmost stretch of the valley, which encompasses the charming towns of Oliver and Osoyoos, is also home to Canada's only desert, the northernmost point of the Sonora desert, which extends up from the Baja peninsula in Mexico. A good starting point, when heading north, is NKMIP (pronounced inka-meep), located just outside of Osoyoos, close to the US border. It is North America's first aboriginal owned and operated winery and is a joint-venture between the Osoyoos Indian Band and Vincor Canada. The winery was designed and built specifically with tours in mind and is just one part of the NKMIP resort destination (see box).

Heading northward toward Oliver, make a stop at Gehringer Brothers, which offers spectacular whites at very reasonable prices, including a delicious Dry Reising that completely won over this writer, previously not a lover of that varietal. Known particularly for its ice wines, Inniskillin Wines of Ontario established a vineyard and winery near Oliver in the mid-'90s. While the ice

wine tour is worth the trip alone, Inniskillin Okanagan has introduced some unique varietals into the area, including Zinfandel, Pinotage and Chenin Blanc. Also don't miss out on Burrowing Owl, a bit of a legend in these parts because of its spectacular wines, which are almost impossible to get outside of the winery and fine-dining establishments.

In Naramata, where the wineries are concentrated even more closely together, La Frenz is gaining quite a following through word of mouth and

made it onto my tasting list because of a great recommendation from a sommelier friend of mine. On top of wonderful reds and whites, they make an awesome tawny Port-style wine and lovely fortified Muscat. From there make a stop at Hillside Estate, where the tasting room and bistro always seem to be hopping busy. With the quality of their wines, including a beautiful Rosé and Cabernet Franc, it's no wonder. At Poplar Grove, they also make a selection of soft cheeses that include a Camembert and a couple of Blues to pair with their wines.

That is just a small sampling of the Okanagan wineries, and it is recommended that you spend at least two or three days in each of these two areas. Several of the wineries have their own Bed & Breakfasts and restaurants. The bad news is that just a very small portion of the Okanagan wines make it beyond our borders, because local demand is so high. But that gives you the perfect excuse to visit what has become known as Napa of the North and Tuscany of Canada.

Kirsten Vance



The spirit of resort life

Nestled on the hillside among the NKMIP vineyards, with spectacular vistas of Lake Osoyoos and the beautiful South Okanagan Valley, the Spirit Ridge Vineyard resort and spa is a welcome oasis where wine tour travelers can enjoy luxury four-star accommodation and rest a weary palate and olfactory after a hard day's tastings. Last spring, Spirit Ridge made it into the insider's guide to Canada in the *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Opened just over two years ago, this boutique resort blends beautifully into its northern desert surroundings. There are 94 condo-style one- and two-bedroom suites and villas that are generously spacious and are tastefully decorated in earthy tones with maple furniture and pretty tiling. Offering views of the lake and vineyards or the golf course, each suite comes complete with a fully equipped kitchen and a large balcony with a barbecue. Rates range from \$149 to \$429. Take this writer's advice, and ask for the lake view. It is divine.

While guests can barbecue and cook to their hearts' content in their own suites, don't let that make you miss out on a delicious gastronomic experience in the resort's own bistro-style Passa Tempo restaurant. Here you can savor some of the chef's creations made with regional products and fresh ingredients as the sun sets in the background, painting the blue lake waters and sky in various shades of orange, red and yellow. I

recommend being a little bit adventurous and trying the bison steak with red wine chocolate sauce, blue cheese cream and potatoes, though the lamb tenderloin is also delectable.

Having opened just two years ago, Spirit Ridge is still in the throes of expansion. Adding to the luxury resort experience, in June the Sonora Desert spa threw open its doors. The spa features desert and indigenously inspired treatments like its Dreamcatcher aromatherapy massage to calm and ground the spirit. And construction of the second phase is currently under way. It will add an additional 132 suites and villas, a second pool, a bistro deli and larger meeting space that will accommodate corporate retreats and meetings.

Spirit Ridge is not a stand-alone resort. A joint-venture between Bellstar Hotels & Resorts and the Osoyoos Indian Band, it is one part of the greater NKMIP experience. Guests at the resort are just a few minutes' walk from the award-winning NKMIP Cellars. There is also the Sonora Dunes golf course, offering a nine-hole course and awesome views of the lake, and the NKMIP Desert Cultural Center with interactive exhibits that celebrate the heritage of the Okanagan aboriginal peoples and the desert ecosystem.

Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa is located at 1200 Rancher Creek road, Osoyoos, BC, Canada, tel. 1.250.4955445, www.spiritridge.ca