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## The Okanagan, a Napa of the North

By [BONNIE TSUI](#)

IT was on the 30-mile-an-hour bicycle descent from the top of Crystal Mountain, to the west, that I got my first panoramic view of Okanagan Lake, which stretches for 70 miles through the valley between the Cascade and Monashee Ranges. Even though I had seen the lake from the shore for two days, as I blew out of the trees now with a group of touring cyclists, it came as a surprise: shimmering and cobalt blue, the hills at its sides covered by grapevines.

This was the [British Columbia](#) of popular imagination, all steep-walled mountain valleys and spectacular snow-fed lakes, but with a bonus: a wine region aspiring to hold its own with the famous [California](#) valleys to the south. Part old-fashioned summer lake resort, part cycling center and traditionally the fruit basket of this part of [Canada](#), the fertile, glacier-formed Okanagan (pronounced oak-a-NOG-in) Valley is changing fast as cherry orchards and nut farms lose ground to the vineyards and as tourism grows along with the grapes. Now, in the heart of the harvest season, days are clear and sunny, the air smells like apples, and grapes hang heavy on the vine.

Though British Columbia is known for ice wine, made by pressing grapes that are left on the vine and plucked at the first significant freeze, few Americans have heard of the Okanagan's other wines; most are not widely available in the [United States](#). For American tourists who find their way there, the valley itself — a five-hour drive east of [Vancouver](#) or a one-hour flight from [Seattle](#) — seems like a discovery.

When I met my friend Anna at the airport in Kelowna, the region's gateway city (population 100,000), a friendly woman at the information desk asked us where we were from. When we answered, she said "New York?" and put her hand to her chest. "Oh my, that's so far! We don't get many of you around here." That may be temporary. The word is getting out about the Okanagan Valley. In a few days there, we found top-notch small-batch wineries where the owners and winemakers work the tasting rooms and roam the grounds.

The valley has 120 wineries so far, with more than 30 licenses pending.

Staff members at the wineries were happy to chat about what sets Okanagan wines apart. We

sampled crisp, fresh whites that absorbed much of the fruity characteristics and acidity of the orchard lands in the north of the valley, which is 120 miles long and has three lakes altogether (Okanagan is by far the biggest). From the hotter southern end, often described as the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert, we tasted big reds like merlots and cabernet sauvignons that were robust and jammy, with soft, pleasing finishes.

In between, we went kayaking and biking and took morning runs along the lake shore, watched the windsurfers and sampled the food. Following the California pattern, the Okanagan Valley, once a traditional farming area, is developing a cuisine to go with its wines.

On our first day of wine touring, we left Kelowna, which combines a pedestrian-friendly waterfront and mountain views with tracts of gas stations and big-box stores. As we headed south, sprawl soon gave way to sun-dappled elms and rolling hills covered in cherry trees.

At our first stop, the Cedar Creek Estate Winery, we found a flourishing rose garden, a terrace restaurant and tasting room in a Mediterranean-style building, and 50 acres of still young vines producing pinot noir, pinot gris, chardonnay, gewürztraminer, ehrenfelser, riesling and merlot grapes.

“The Okanagan is a really young wine region,” Cedar Creek’s president, Gordon Fitzpatrick, said. “We’re just getting started, but there’s a lot of promise here.” In 1988, the Canadian government sponsored a vine-pulling program, offering incentives to growers already in the Okanagan to yank out their native American and hybrid French vines and replant with higher-quality European varietals. “We started our winery in 1986, and it was only in 1991 that we pulled out all the old vines,” Mr. Fitzpatrick said.

Cedar Creek was voted Canada’s Winery of the Year in 2002 and 2005, awards given by Canadian Wine Access magazine, and surprised the international wine industry in 2002 by winning three gold medals at the [Los Angeles](#) County Fair Wines of the World, one of the oldest and largest wine competitions in the United States.

The winery had a polished, yet intimate feel, with service that put it on a par with most wineries I’ve visited in northern California.

Another day, we signed up for a cycle-to-winery tour with Monashee Adventure Tours in Kelowna. Biking is big in the Okanagan; extensive trail networks crisscross the hills and mountains above the valley. A challenging 108-mile trail follows an abandoned section of the Kettle Valley Railway through terraced slopes, and laid-back cruiser routes wind through provincial parks around the lakeshore. On this 10-mile outing, we started with the descent

from Crystal Mountain and then rode leisurely along mostly paved lakeside bike paths, stopping to sniff fragrant ponderosa pines, visit a nut farm and watch ospreys suspended gracefully over the water.

Along for the ride were Bill and Mary Kennedy, [Toronto](#) residents who had come to the Okanagan expressly for the cycling. They'd spent the previous week experimenting with different trails around the valley and wanted a change of pace. They — and we — weren't disappointed. The real finish line of the ride was a marathon lunch at Quails' Gate Estate Winery, a valley pioneer that specializes in chardonnays and pinot noir. At its restaurant patio, we ate a summery meal of grilled salmon penne with a series of wines (the limited-release gewürtztraminer was particularly refreshing and crisp). Beyond our tables, the panorama of the lakefront, watercraft wake lines and row upon row of grapevines, with mountains in the distance, was mesmerizing.

Long before the current bloom of wineries, the Okanagan Valley was known for its produce, though not for the small growers who have recently specialized in supplying discriminating buyers from lovingly tended plots.

"The sun was the big reason that brought us here — the weather is great," said Rod Butters, who came to the Okanagan in 1991 from Vancouver Island and owns Fresco, a restaurant in Kelowna that is often recognized as one of British Columbia's best

"It's like Sonoma and Napa — all the ingredients are here," Mr. Butters said. "When I first arrived, the produce was being trucked all over the world, but there was nobody here utilizing it. You couldn't even buy it in the store. There was a need for someone to bring it to the table, to introduce that culture of food."

Fresco's special house martinis change daily depending on what fruit is being harvested. "Last year, we bought 750 pounds of raspberries from an organic farm on the outskirts of town," said Audrey Serrao, Mr. Butters's wife and business partner.

We dined at Fresco on organic yellow beets and cucumber dressed in blueberry vinaigrette, stuffed oysters, prosciutto-wrapped baked ling cod and a sampling of vegetarian dishes, with a bottle of 2005 viognier (for 43 Canadian dollars, about \$38 at 1.14 Canadian dollars to the U.S. dollar) from La Frenz, a small producer in Naramata, farther south down the valley.

Naramata is the center of the wine region. On the Naramata Bench, the land just north of the isthmus that separates Okanagan and Skaha Lakes, every visible square mile is growing, blooming, bearing fruit. Tucked away among the wineries, at the ends of dirt roads, are small

specialty producers: a blueberry farm here, a fruit orchard there.

There's even an organic cooking school, Joie Farm. It is run by Heidi Noble, a chef and sommelier, and her husband, Michael Dinn, who moved to the Okanagan from Vancouver three years ago. Many of their ingredients come from their five-acre farm, which has organic pear and apple orchards. "It's still not a thriving food culture yet," Ms. Noble said, "but there is an emerging Okanagan cuisine." Two years ago they started making wine, and their school runs from June through September, ending when the wine harvest starts.

"It might be a new tourist area, but it's a real bounty of produce," Ms. Noble said as she led me past rows of beets to a red-painted smokehouse and outdoor kitchen. The lake, ever-present, sparkled winningly below.

THE Okanagan's still limited night life thrives at the lakeside, too. At the Hotel Eldorado in Kelowna, we watched from the restaurant and bar as the whole town seemed to flock to a string of boardwalk tables outside to drink margaritas from the hotel bar and watch the watercraft buzz by. It felt like an updated Canadian version of "Dirty Dancing" — a restless mountain resort crowd, with powerboats added.

It occurred to us on our last full day in Okanagan that though we had spent a lot of time around Okanagan Lake and above it — examining what its climate nurtures, watching speedboats and swimmers — we hadn't actually gotten onto it. At the Eldorado Marina, we rented two kayaks and paddled off.

As we neared the middle of the lake, the steep walls of the valley rose up dramatically on either side, all that hummocky green lushness fusing together, one shade into the next. Sailboats and canoes skimmed the water at a distance, and a pair of tiny cyclists climbed a hilly road, barely visible on the cliff above us. It was yet another angle into the Okanagan, but it was a wide one. Paddling, I thought, might be the best way yet to see this wine country.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

### WHERE TO STAY

The new 36-room wing at the Hotel Eldorado (500 Cook Road, Kelowna; 250-763-7500; [www.hoteleldoradokelowna.com](http://www.hoteleldoradokelowna.com)) has 1920's and 30's décor touches (doubles from 149 Canadian dollars, about \$113 at 1.14 Canadian dollars to the U.S. dollar). The Naramata Heritage Inn (3625 First Street, Naramata; 866-617-1188; [www.naramatainn.com](http://www.naramatainn.com)) has polished wood floors, claw-footed tubs and antique furnishings, with an Aveda spa downstairs.

A room with a queen bed is 209 Canadian dollars on weekdays, Continental breakfast included.

#### WHERE TO TASTE (AND EAT)

Cedar Creek Estate Winery (250-764 8866; [www.cedarcreek.bc.ca](http://www.cedarcreek.bc.ca).) is at 5445 Lakeshore Road, Kelowna.

Quails' Gate Estate Winery (800-420-9463; [www.quailsgate.com](http://www.quailsgate.com)), is also in Kelowna, at 3303 Boucherie Road.

Sumac Ridge Estate Winery, (17403 Highway 97 North, Summerland; 250-494-0451, [www.sumacridge.com](http://www.sumacridge.com)), one of the oldest in the valley, released its first vintage in 1980 and was the first to introduce blends with traditional Bordeaux varietals.

Mission Hill Family Estates (1730 Mission Hill Road, Kelowna; 800-957-9911; [www.missionhillwinery.com](http://www.missionhillwinery.com)), the valley's largest winery, is a temple to wine with manicured grounds, a concert amphitheater, a reception room with a Chagall tapestry, a terrace restaurant set high above the valley, and a state-of-the-art tasting room.

At Fresco (1560 Water Street, Kelowna; 250-868-8805), dinner for two is about 100 Canadian dollars, without wine.

Ofri and Ofer Barmor make 20 different goat cheeses at their farm, Carmelis (170 Timberline Road, Kelowna; 250-470-0341) and team up with Cedar Creek Estate for wine and cheese fests (55 Canadian dollars a person).

At Joie Farm Cooking School (2825 Naramata Road; 250-496-0093; [www.joie.ca](http://www.joie.ca)), Saturday and Sunday classes, from 8:30 a.m., with cooking done by 1, are 155 Canadian dollars.

Elephant Island (2730 Aikins Loop, Naramata; 250-496-5522; [www.elephantislandwine.com](http://www.elephantislandwine.com)) has fruit wines that reflect the history of the Naramata Bench as a fruit-producing region.

#### MORE TO DO

Kayaks (from 20 Canadian dollars an hour) and other watercraft can be rented from the marina at the Hotel Eldorado.

Cycle-to-winery tours at Monashee Adventure Tours, (888-762-9253; [www.monasheeadventuretours.com](http://www.monasheeadventuretours.com)) start at 80 Canadian dollars and include easy cruises and challenging rail-trail routes, with a running regional color commentary peppered with

historical anecdotes; (trips that include lunch, usually at a winery, start at 120 Canadian dollars).

At Beyond Wraapture (1965 Richter Street, Kelowna; 866-548-8899), vinotherapy massages (100 Canadian dollars for an hour and 15 minutes) take advantage of antioxidants found in local grapes, using seeds, skins, wine and honey.

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