

CANADA

force of nature

Overseas travel may still be off the cards, but Canada's Okanagan Valley is sure to inspire a little wanderlust. This idyllic place is stepping out of the shadows, and its wines are turning heads.



IT'S LITTLE WONDER that few outside Canada are familiar with the Okanagan Valley. This narrow green ribbon of land is scattered with pine trees, roamed by black bears and wild deer, dotted with quaint towns and strung with glacial-fed lakes, all tucked away in the British Columbia hinterland. This small sleepy corner was once better known as the country's fruit bowl and a retiree's nirvana, but over the past 30 years, that staid legacy has slowly been recast. A crop of young entrepreneurs, chefs and winemakers have made this beautiful pocket their home, its sun-baking the Okanagan's new identity as a food and wine destination. Some pundits have even baptised the nascent wine region "the next Napa". For now, at least, the Canucks are more than happy their dreamy enclave of fine rivers remains largely undiscovered. 40

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Left to right: Vineyards in Penticton; the iconic Mission Hill winery; Cedar Creek Estate winery is also home to Home Black Restaurant; before views from Poplar Grove winery.



"In some ways it's still Canada's best-kept secret," says Philip McGahan, the Australian winemaker at CheckMate Artisanal Winery. "When I first got here, people [back home] couldn't believe I was making wine in Canada. We get the odd Aussie come through the door, but it's a discovery for them." With a vision to craft New World wine using Old World techniques, CheckMate is arguably the premium winery that helped put the region on the map. Early last year it also became the country's first winery to receive a perfect score for a table wine when critic John Schreiner awarded the 2015 Little Pown Chardonnay a 100-point.

Among the region's younger outfits, CheckMate was established in 2012 on the Golden Mile Beach, BC's five subregions. Its vines, however, are among the valley's oldest; legend has it the region's highly aromatic chardonnay clone was planted by a Croatian family around 15 years ago, when European immigrants were still bringing over cuttings in their suitcases. Producing just 2000 cases of natural, organic, award-winning chardonnay and merlot annually – and with its cheapest bottle sitting in at A\$80 – it's fair to say CheckMate is a boutique operation. But it's far from an outlier in the valley. Also among the region's new vanguard is North America's first Indigenous-owned winery, N'Mip Cellars, as well as a vegan, bio-urban winery that uses only concrete and stainless steel to age its grapes, and Mission Hill Winery, which has a work-orientated, modern-industrial design, and was named among the World's 50 Best Vineyards last year.

In 1996, 17 licensed wineries occupied these shores. That figure has since skyrocketed to 185, with blossoming culinary and microbrewery scenes, both pilgrimage-worthy in their own right. The offering today extends well beyond ice wine, too. More than 60 grape varieties grow here, with chardonnay, pinot gris, pinot noir, merlot and syrah among the most lauded.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

It's thanks to late starts, low expectations and a mix of misconceptions that the Okanagan has kept a low-profile. Although the first commercial grape plantings were made in the Kelowna area in 1896, it wasn't until 1980 – when the Canadian-US free trade agreement was concluded – that the region's outlook



transformed. As a result of the pact, the Canadian government incentivised local wineries to dig up the hybrid and native vines that dominated the region, replacing them with more heavily appealing and internationally competitive vitis vinifera. Not wary were quick to claim that vitifera wouldn't survive Canada's harsh winters, yet the Okanagan Valley experiences the mildest winters of any non-coastal area in the country. It's one of just six wine regions globally where the snow-kissed is dramatically influenced by an inland water mass, providing a moderating effect. "We're inside the climatic envelope, but not by a big margin," says CheckMate's Philip. "It's quite different to the Australian environment. We're 49 degrees north and have a short season of four-and-a-half to five months, which gives us a real purity of fruit – the wines have a nice elegance to them."

Stretching more than 200 kilometres from toe to tip, Okanagan wine country encompasses Canada's only desert in its south, and the cool, wetter climes of Lake Country in its north. Populated with extinct volcanoes, and formed by repeated glacial ages, the valley's soils are rich in nutrients and minerals; they also sit on the same latitude as the wine regions of Champagne and Germany's Rheingau. The Okanagan is a one-hour flight, or four-hour drive, from Vancouver, but the tempo of daily life feels light years away.

local wineries a laissez-faire attitude. The guiding principles of family-owned Poplar Grove typify this regional approach. "We don't believe in doing anything to the wine," explains Tony Haller, explains Tony Haller, owner of the Santarina Bench winery. "We want a nice acidic backbone to [our] wine, we want it dry and we want it fruit forward." To help showcase the fruit, Poplar Grove's team is scrupulous when it comes to aging, employing only new and young French oak. "American oak is just too strong for these grapes," he says. The proof is in the pudding: Poplar Grove's 2015 Syrah is refined, fleshy, juicy, ripe with plum and dark berry characters, and remarkably refreshing. Its whites are expressive too; the 2015 Pinot Gris is rich with floral and pear notes and redolent of stone fruit on the palate, yet balanced by minerality and acid. Kelowna newcomer Bico-Bambino takes the less-is-more approach one step further, blanketing the amount of "nothing added, nothing taken away." The urban winery's minimal intervention wines are all wild fermented, seasonal and mostly unfiltered, and feature minimal, if any, sulphites. In fine skin contact, whole-bunch 2018 Sauvignon Blanc is possibly the most interesting expression of the style I've sampled, with a velvety mouthfeel and fine acid line, tempered by hints of apricot. Letting the grapes and terroir do the talking is seemingly interconnected to the slow pace of life and deep connection to nature that permeates this pristine valley. It's a matter of pride for the locals, with many of them investing in the region when few believed in its potential. This year, that progressive vision will be set in stone as the Okanagan becomes the largest organically farmed wine region in the world. With just five per cent of this flourishing young wine region's bottles reaching the export market, it's no surprise Canadian wine remains overlooked. For now, at least. 41

NATURE RUNS ITS COURSE

Kelowna, the region's biggest city (pop. 132,000), hugs the shores of Okanagan Lake and is encircled by curvy mountains. The highlands outside the region's unofficial capital double as ski fields in winter and mountain biking trails come summer, but even downtown is a hub of wholesome outdoorism. Items cruise along the lakefront boardwalks on longboards, families picnic on grassy knolls and idle beneath parasols on the lake's golden sandy shores, and boats tow parasails along glassy waters. Sprawling farmers' markets swell on up streets. Picture-perfect lakes, hills on trails and wedges of Canada geese flying overhead. Perhaps it's this laidback lifestyle that has set the tone for the region's winemakers. While each Okanagan winery has its own MO, there is one overarching philosophy that seems to unite

Left to right: overlooking Penticton; downtown Kelowna; the outlook at Poplar Grove's cellar door.



WHAT TO SEE

The best way to maximise your stay in the Okanagan is to embrace the help of a local expert. Kelowna Concierge organises bespoke tours to the region's vineyards, breweries, distilleries and more, and the company's small and friendly team can plan your stay from end-to-end. kelownaconcierge.ca

WHERE TO STAY

Base yourself in the town of Penticton or Kelowna. The former has a slightly retro-but-hip yet enduring appeal, while the latter is bigger and more polished. The four-star Mariposa Resort Winfront Hotel is arguably Kelowna's top pick, boasting 300 rooms of lakeside frontage, spacious guestrooms and villas, plus a clubhouse for kids. In Penticton, try the Lakelse Resort on the water's edge. At modest 19 stories, Best Wing Tower offers stellar views. mariposa.com pentictodileadersort.com

WHERE TO EAT

Many wineries have restaurants that are destinations of their own, including the new Home Block at Cedar Creek Winery offering true farm-to-table dining. Many of its dishes are cooked atop the restaurant's centerpiece – a gigantic wood-fired grill. It also features panoramic views across the Okanagan Lake. Legally Eatin' is another top performer, and produces imaginative, elaborate dishes, such as sous-vide beef carpaccio mushrooms and beetroot jerky with confit beans and black quinoa. Poplar Grove, meanwhile, is perfect for classic continental inspired oodles (think soft-shell clams, cigars and charred octopus with potato). cedarblock.bc.ca legallyeat.com poplargrv.ca

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