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— Matt Villano, San Francisco Chronicle



Abundant Kelowna

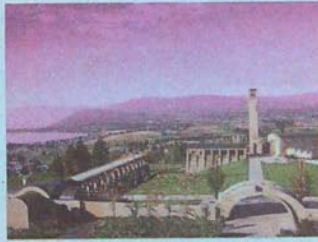
Ask any top-flight chef about the importance of fresh, premium ingredients and you will likely invoke a passionate response. It's rare, however, to find situations where food producers are equally engaged in the dialogue. But that's how it is in Kelowna, a city rooted amid one of Canada's most picturesque and bountiful agricultural and viticulture belts.

All told, there are more than 14 wineries in the Kelowna area alone, part of a collection of more than 74 wineries in the surrounding Okanagan Valley. Restaurants like Fresco, a AAA Four-Diamond establishment whose kitchen is piloted by recent BC Restaurant Hall of Fame inductee Chef Rod Butters, transform the region's bounty into delectable seasonal cuisine.

At the Terrace restaurant at Mission Hill Family Estate Winery, a Tuscan-bred, multimillion-dollar architectural masterpiece that overlooks Okanagan Lake, celebrity Chef Michael Allemeier prepares dishes in a light, seasonal, wine-country style he aptly calls "Cuisine de Terroir."

"It's about keeping the flavours clean," says Allemeier. "Wine respects purity and honesty in cuisine. And yet, simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve."

While the Terrace's menu is updated about every two weeks to reflect the season's best, among this year's planned signature items



PHOTOS: TOURISM KELLOWNA

Kelowna's gourmet wine country restaurants, such as the Vineyard Terrace at CedarCreek Estate Winery, (top left) are fed by the Okanagan Valley's fresh agricultural bounty and artisan food purveyors such as Carmelis Goat Cheese Farm. Not only is the dining first-rate, the views from restaurants such as the Terrace at Mission Hill Family Estate Winery are breathtaking.

are tempting starters such as the Mission Hill herb garden sorrel soup with seared sea scallop and butter potatoes (paired with a 2004 S.L.C. Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon). The butternut squash mascarpone ravioli with fried shallot, chestnut and cilantro, paired with a buttery 2004 Reserve Chardonnay, is among the choices of heavenly mains.

Although Mission Hill grows sorrel, herbs and a few other items onsite, and buys others from a number of small producers, most of its produce comes from five farms — Little Creek Gardens, Greencroft, Cross Orchards, Stoney Paradise

and Suncatcher — with which it holds exclusive relationships.

The annual collaboration begins each winter when Allemeier and his suppliers go through seed catalogues together, carefully selecting vegetables to grow. Allemeier enthusiastically describes the distinct terroir, expertise and other attributes of each farm.

For example, he says Wolfe at Greencroft Gardens "is the root man," and Dale at Little Creek Gardens carefully blends a herbaceous sweet mix Mesclaine salad for Mission Hill, while Cross Orchards, from which Mission Hill last year purchased 12,000 pounds of fruit, is

renowned for sweet blackberries "the size of golf balls."

The appearance of supplier names on the Terrace's menu conveys their noteworthy status. The notion of trying "Loretta's Blackberries and Angel Food Cake Trifle," or a starter such as the "Suncatcher Farm Asparagus Salad with Hazel-

nut Crusted Carmelis Chevre" is enticing.

On the far side of the lake, Carmelis Goat Cheese Farm (www.carmelisoatcheese.com) is just a few minutes down the road from CedarCreek Estate Winery (named in 2002 and 2005 Canada's Best Winery at the Canadian Wine

Awards). Carmelis' proprietors Ofer and Ofri Barmor say they enjoy great relationships with all of the region's wineries and fine restaurants.

In fact, Ofri credits Michael Allemeier for inspiring her to sell what has become one of Carmelis' most popular cheeses, a traditional soft, French goat cheese called Chabichou.

Like other chefs, Allemeier brought his kitchen staff to tour the farm. "We did a tasting and they tried the Chabichou, which we had originally learned to make in France. They loved it."

Ofri says Allemeier "bugged her" to produce it commercially, assuring her it would be a big hit. And it is, though not the only one. Carmelis sells more than 20 artisan cheeses and goat milk products.

Tourists flock to Carmelis during the summer months to visit this storybook farm nestled high in the pine-topped slopes above the lake's eastern shore. But tourists aren't the only ones who visit. "I encourage chefs and restaurant owners to bring their staff," says Ofri. "When they see how much hard work and love we put into our cheese, they're better equipped to talk to their customers about the cheeses."

Allemeier says, "It's more than business; it's a community. We're all architects building this great region."

