

# GOING gourmet



All photos by Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Sunday  
Wine fest primer

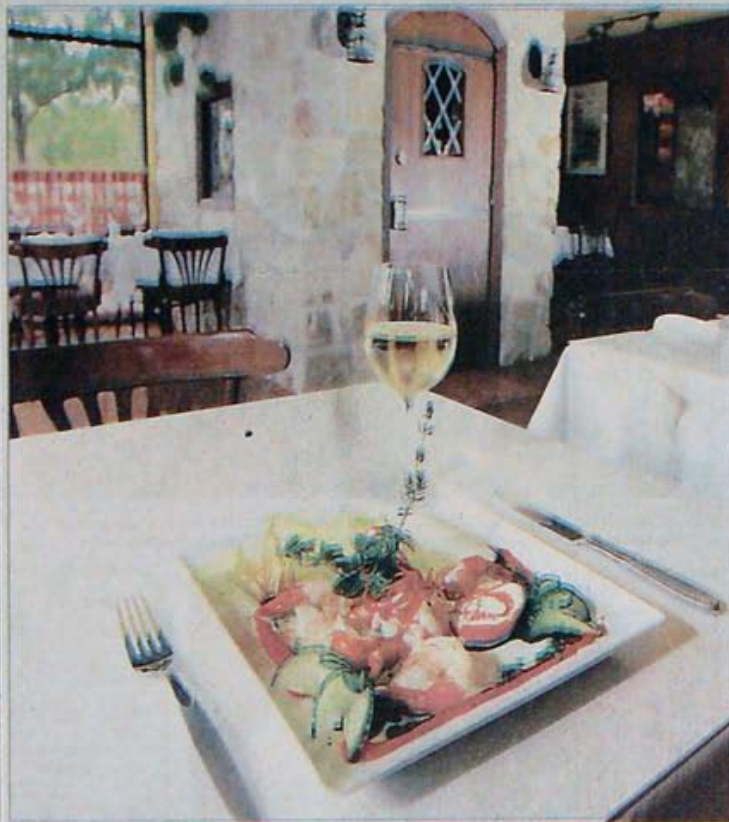
Tuesday  
Perfect future

Today  
Going gourmet in the valley

Thursday  
Fitness among the vines

Friday  
The Sideways tour  
of the Okanagan

You can't have fine wine without fine food. You can experience both here as the valley's dining scene undergoes a remarkable shift



**ABOVE:**  
A tempting plate of smoked salmon roulade with prawns has been prepared by Andre Bernier, chef at Kelowna's Bouchons French bistro.

**RIGHT:**  
Rod Butters, chef and co-owner of Kelowna's Fresco, moved from foggy Tofino, B.C., to the sunny Okanagan.



**JOANNE SASVARI**  
CALGARY HERALD  
KELOWNA, B.C.

**I**f I were a chef, I know where I'd be moving tomorrow.

"Look at it, it's just happening. I can't imagine what took so long," says Rod Butters. "Everyone's coming. Everyone from Alberta's coming, everyone from Vancouver. Everyone."

Butters is the chef and co-owner (with his wife, Audrey Surrau) of the four-diamond Fresco Restaurant in Kelowna. He is part of the remarkable transformation of the culinary scene in the Okanagan Valley, a region until recently better known for its early bird specials than its fine dining.

As Mission Hill Winery chef Michael Allemeier remembers it from his first visit in 1992, "It was very much peaches and beaches and the wine was not really part of it. Now, people come up just for the wine."

Wine has been made here commercially since the early part of the 20th century. But it wasn't until the 1990s that the industry began to take itself seriously.

Now, it's time for the food scene to catch up. And by the look of things, it won't take long before this is the most exciting culinary destination in the country.

### The raw ingredients

Long before the Okanagan was known for wine, it was known for apples, peaches, cherries and all sorts of fresh produce. Increasingly, it's becoming well known for its organic produce, as well as its artisanal cheese, game, bread and more.

"We have lots of organic farms here," says Andre Bernier, chef at the charming French bistro Bouchons in Kelowna. "I have one myself, a little one, three acres."

He grows fruit, vegetables and grapes, though not enough to make wine. "One day maybe," he says with a smile.

Still, he grows enough apricots, cherries, tomatoes and walnuts to supply his restaurant, at least in summer, and is amazed by the quality of the produce throughout the region.

"The valley has grown up a lot. Quality restaurants, quality products, quality wine," Bernier says.

"The chefs here are so into using the local producers," says Ofri Barmor, who owns Carmelis Goat Cheese Artisan with her husband, Ofer. "I'm so proud to be part of the food thing here. It's great how the chefs support you."

Carmelis produces goat cheeses that range from soft, fresh Chevy to the creamy, soft rind Heavenly to the Italian-style Lior and Carmel (named for the couple's daughters) and the tangy blue Goatgonzola. Their cheeses are popular choices at Fresco, the Toasted Oak Wine Bar in Oliver, B.C. and Mission Hill Winery in Westbank, B.C.

There, Allemeier relies on the produce from five organic farms to supply the Terrace Restaurant and the numerous events the winery hosts each week.

"Each grower's got their own microclimate, their own terroir, and we plan the season together," he says.

One of his favourite features of the winery is the spectacular, three-level herb garden that has everything from mint to sage to rosemary.

"It's so nice for special chef's tables when we talk about the herb garden to be able to cook with herbs from the garden," says his sous chef, Tim Cuff, who runs day-to-day operations for the Terrace.

Now, Allemeier is inspired with a new vision — to make it a varietal specific garden. Each section would contain fruits and herbs that go with a specific varietal. For instance, he'd plant plum trees, strawberries, mint and so on in the Pinot Noir section.

Butters knows the pleasure of having your own garden — he had the first urban restaurant herb garden in Vancouver when he was executive chef at the Pallasades Hotel on Robson Street — but at Fresco, he simply relies on local growers.

"I have this incredible supply of farms. People want to plant their own apple trees.

"Why would you when you can walk down the street and buy the most amazing organic apple in the world?" Butters says.

"It's the chef's ultimate playground. And no one's really tapped into it — chefs, supermarkets, no one."