

## The lifestyle

Many chefs and producers are coming to the Okanagan for the same reason tourists and retirees do — the lakes and beaches, the slower pace, the friendly people, the climate, the lifestyle.

"This is the best place on Earth, don't you think so?" says Barmor. "We came here for skiing and we fell in love with this place. We made a very quick decision to stay."

She, Ofer and their daughters Carmel, 12, and Lior, 10, moved to Kelowna from Israel in 2003. They bought a small herd of 90 goats (back home, they had 600 goats and 1,000 sheep) and began their artisanal goat cheese operation.

The goats arrived on Aug. 12. On Aug. 16, with the valley in flames during the devastating fires that summer, they were ordered to evacuate their new home.

"We got a warm welcome," Barmor says wryly. "It was right here. The house survived, but everything else was gone."

As the flames licked the edge of their property, they were frantic to house their goats, but they hardly knew anyone in their new community and didn't know where to turn for help.

"We didn't know what to do. In Israel, when you get a suicide bomber, you don't get an evacuation order," Barmor says.

So Ofer went on the radio and asked if anyone would put their goats up until the fires passed.

"It took maybe half an hour and there were maybe 10 pickup trucks with trailers on the road. To this day, I don't know who they all were," Barmor says, her eyes soft with tears.

"It's really amazing. In Israel, we get so used to disaster every day people don't really care what happens to you. I'm very proud to be part of this community."

The valley abounds with stories of how people helped during the fires of 2003. For instance, there's the story of the winery that lost its entire crop — and all the neighbouring vineyards donated their own grapes so it wouldn't miss the vintage.

Allemeier remembers that summer well. He'd just started at Mission Hill when the fires began.

"We moved into our house Aug. 15, and that was the night of the fires," he says.

Allemeier came to Kelowna from Calgary, where he'd been chef at Teatro for a number of years. Before that, he'd cooked in Whistler, B.C., and, for seven years, at Bishop's in Vancouver.

He loves his new life, the variety, the challenges, the wine country lifestyle.

"I think people are slowing down and enjoying the pleasures of the table," he says.

"What a great way to improve your life, by improving it with great food and wine."

For Butters, the climate alone was enough to call him to the Okanagan. For five years, he'd run the kitchen at the spectacular Wickannish Inn in rainy, foggy Tofino, B.C.

"I really wanted to wake up and see the sunshine every day after five years in Tofino," he says.

Bernier and his partners were attracted to the lifestyle, too.

"I was tired of the city, and the Okanagan, there was lots of opportunity here. There was no French bistro in town," he says.

For years, his team had owned and operated the popular Cafe de Paris on Vancouver's Denman Street.

They sold it, moved to Kelowna and opened the upscale Bouchons in May 2004.

seasonal Terrace Restaurant, the other for classes, special parties, group events and chef's tables.

"What makes our philosophy so unique here, what's so exciting, is that I'm looking at food in a whole different light here," he says.

In the normal run of things, a chef prepares his own menu and then the sommelier matches the wine to it. At Mission Hill, it's the other way around.

"We build all of our food around our wines," Allemeier says. "The food's always enhancing or complementing our wines. We like to call our food 'cuisine de terroir.'"

"It's a good way to look at it, I think."

He's mightily impressed by the improvements in the quality of the valley's wines — and with it, the quality of the cuisine that goes with them.

"There is not a winery where you can't sense the pride. It certainly wasn't like that when I came here in '92," he says. "I think it's terrific that our winemakers are meeting that challenge."

And, he notes, it's remarkable how many wineries have put in top-notch restaurants — something that is a bit of a rarity in wine countries worldwide.

"It seems like a no-brainer, but you go to Napa, and there's only one winery that sells food, and that was grandfathered in," Allemeier says.

He adds, proudly, "Every year, we learn, every year, we grow, just like our winemakers."

For Butters, the challenge lies in maintaining the high standards he set from the get-go. "Within our first year, we were awarded four diamonds by AAA North America.

"We've been working very hard to keep that rating," he says, pausing in the midst of preparations for a wine festival dinner. "It's only one of 10 restaurants to win four diamonds, and the only one east of Vancouver."

He looks out over his perfect little restaurant — 50 to 60 seats in a 92-year-old building that perfectly pairs Kelowna's downtown heritage with a sleek, contemporary style — and looks as contented as a busy chef ever will.

"I hope you could put this restaurant anywhere: New York, Vancouver, Calgary, wherever," he says. But he's happy that it's in the Okanagan.

"Everyone you talk to in our industry talks about the Okanagan," Butters says. "And I wanted to be the first on the block."

Yep, if I were a chef, I'd be packing my toque, my knives and my bike, and heading straight for the vineyards and beaches along B.C.'s Highway 97.

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## If you go

■ Bouchons is at #105 1180 Sunset Dr., Kelowna, (250) 763-6595.

www.bouchonsbistro.com.  
■ Fresco is at 1560 Water St., Kelowna, (250) 868-8805, www.frescorestaurant.net.

■ Mission Hill Winery is at 1730 Mission Hill Rd., Westbank, (250) 768-6467 (for the Terrace, which closes this weekend for the winter) or (250) 768-6443 (for private dining experiences, www.missionhillwinery.com).

■ Carmelis Goat Cheese Artisan is at 170 Timberline Rd., Kelowna, (250) 764-9033, www.carmelisoatcheese.com.

■ Contact the Okanagan Wine Festival Society at (250) 861-6654 or info@thewinefesti-



Organic carrots, plump cabbage and juicy apples tempt buyers at Kelowna Market.



Ofri Barmor, who owns Carmelis Goat Cheese Artisan in Kelowna with her husband, had to seek safety for her animals when the hillsides erupted in flames in 2003.



Michael Allemeier, left, and Tim Cuff pair food with Mission Hill Vineyard's award-winning wines. Both men used to work in Calgary's Teatro before moving to B.C.



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