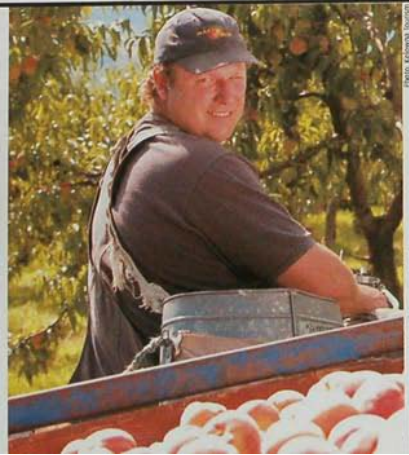


# Loving the Okanagan

The Okanagan's first vineyards are turning 25 this year. Following the example set by the valley's wineries, restaurants, hotels, and golf courses are springing up all over this emerging "Napa North." Even the desert is starting to sport some colourful blooms. By Nathalie De Grandmont

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A few years ago, the Okanagan Valley was all "Peaches and Beaches." And there are still many places to enjoy memorable days on the beaches of Okanagan Lake, followed by a picnic staving windfall peaches, apples, and cherries plucked at will from one of the area's many orchards. Those innocent times aren't completely over, and many vacationers still keep their eyes peeled for Ogopogo, the mythical monster that's supposed to inhabit the waters of the wondrous 110-kilometre lake. In Penticton, for example, summer still means RVs, swimming, vintage-car rallies, and Elvis look-alike contests; lakeside bars serve more beer and root beer than anything else. But increasingly, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Sauvignon are the magic words on visitors' lips as the region steadily builds an impressive reputation for a lifestyle built around fine food and wine.

**From vineyard to table**  
Among the Okanagan's oldest working wineries is **Sumac Ridge**, in Summerland, it's celebrating its silver anniversary this year. Its history since the first vines were planted in 1980 mirrors that of most of its peers. In the early years, Sumac Ridge made mainly white wine, especially Chardonnay and its flagship Gewürztraminer, which soon garnered numerous awards both in Canada and abroad. Owner Harry McWatters also founded the Okanagan Wine Festival, which became so popular that it now has four seasonal sections, including a winter event to celebrate the new icewine vintage. In 1989, the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, and resulting competition from American wineries, forced Okanagan winners to make a major push to improve quality even further. They planted higher-quality vines and, within a few years, were proudly offering their first reds made from Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Pinot Noir, among other varieties. Thanks to the valley's dry climate, the reds soon became stars in their own right, a fact confirmed by a large haul of Canadian and international awards. But what about bubbly? That followed in the 90s, when Steller's Jay Brut—another Sumac Ridge creation—became the region's first wine made using the traditional methods of France's Champagne region. Today, most Okanagan

## Getaway



Kelowna Marina

PHOTO: MICHELE BOUTIER

wineries release a full range of products, including icewines that have wowed visitors and judges at the most prestigious international events for over a decade.

Since 1990, certification by the VQA (Vintners Quality Alliance) has been the means used to identify wines made in British Columbia from grapes grown in the province in compliance with a strict set of criteria. What's more, the local orchards have taken note of development in the wine business and started to broaden their offerings. **Kelowna Land & Orchard**, for example, has built a cidery that produces hard apple ciders and, most impressively, lip-smacking ice ciders. There's no better way to cap the traditional tractor tour of the orchard than to enjoy a glass served well chilled on the patio.

Wine isn't the only thing that's bringing a sparkle to the area: The whole valley and its business community seem to be enjoying a golden age. In addition to Sumac Ridge's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, which run until December, almost all of the region's wineries are working feverishly to prepare for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Some are developing new products specifically for the Games, while others are expanding their restaurants or building hotels, in the process recruiting the best up-and-coming chefs and sommeliers from Vancouver and Victoria. All you have to do is enjoy a meal at the **Lake Breeze** winery in Naramata or at Kelowna's **Cedar Creek**, and it becomes clear that these young chefs are deeply inspired by local wine and ingredients—the success of the wineries has led to a burgeoning industry supplying premium agricultural products. In Kelowna, for example, the vineyards' neighbours now include organic market gardens, the Lavender Farm, and the Carmels artisanal goat cheese factory, where restaurants and visitors love to shop for fresh goat cheese and firm cheddar-style cheeses—in all, the establishment produces over 20 different kinds. With a growing range of products and the dishes that chefs are creating with them, any visitor with the slightest appreciation for gourmet fare is sure to fall in love.

The Okanagan wine route has become a bona fide gastronomic destination. With easily spot-



filling bottles in Kelowna