

The Okanagan, a Napa of the North

By BONNIE TSUI

I was on the 36-mile-a-hour bicycle descent from the top of Crystal Mountain, to the west, the view of the panoramic stretches for 70 miles through the valley between the Cascade and Monashee ranges. Even though I had seen the lake from the trees now with a surprise: shimmering and cobalt blue, the hills at its sides covered by grapevines.

The Okanagan, British Columbia of popular imagination, all spectacular wine- and lake, but with a bonus: a wine region aspiring to hold its own with the famous California summer lake south. Part old-fashioned center and traditionally the fruit basket of this part of Canada, the fertile, glacier-irrigated Okanagan (pronounced oak-a-nagan) valley is changing fast as cherry orchards and vineyards are ground to the grapes. Now, in the heart of the harvest season, days are clear and sunny, the air crisp with apples, and grapes hang heavy on the vines.

Though British Columbia is known for ice wine, made by pressing grapes that are left on the vine and plucked at the first significant freeze, few Americans have heard of Okanagan wines; most are not widely available in the United States. American tourists who find their way there, the valley's five-hour drive east of Vancouver or a one-hour flight from Seattle—seems like a discovery.

When I met my friend Anna at the airport in Kelowna, British Columbia's gateway city (population 100,000), a friendly woman at the information desk

wild tracts of gas stations and big-box stores. As we headed south, sprawl soon gave way to sun-dappled elms and rolling hills covered in cherry trees.

At our first stop, the Cedar Creek Estate Winery, we found a flourishing rose garden, a terrace restaurant and tasting room in a Mediterranean-style building, and 50 acres of still young vines producing pinot noir, pinot gris, chardonnay, gewürztraminer, ehrenfeiser, riesling and merlot grapes.

"The Okanagan is a really young wine region," Cedar Creek's president, Gordon Fitzpatrick, said. "We're just getting started, but there's a lot of promise here." In 1988, the Canadian government sponsored a vine-pulling program, offering incentives to growers already in the Okanagan to yank out their native American and hybrid French vines and replant with higher-quality European varietals. "We started our winery in 1988, and it was only in 1991 that we pulled out all the old vines," Mr. Fitzpatrick said.

Cedar Creek was voted Canada's Winery

Smart host for the new York Times

FRUITED PLAINS A lunch of halibut and a riesling at Quail's Gate Estate Winery in British Columbia.

asked us where we were from. When we answered, she said "New York?" and put her hand to her forehead. "Oh my, that's so far! We don't get many of you around here, but it's temporary. The word is getting out about it. There are only a few days there, we found top-notch small-batch wineries where the owners and winemakers work the tasting rooms and roam the grounds. The valley has 120 wineries so far, with more

than 30 licenses pending. Staff members at the wineries were happy to chat about what sets Okanagan wines apart. We sampled crisp, fresh whites that absorbed much of the fruity characteristics and acidity of the orchard. The valley is in the north of the valley, which is 120 miles long and has three lakes altogether (Okanagan

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AND VINE The vineyards of Quail's Gate Estate Winery in Kelowna, British Columbia, are set along 70-mile-long Lake Okanagan.

Photographs by Smart host for The New York Times

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is by far the biggest). From the hotter here end, often described as the north- tip of the Sooran Desert, we tasted big like merlots and cabernet sauvignons were robust and jammy, with soft, sing finishes.

between, we went kayaking and biking took morning runs along the lake shore, shed the windsurfers and sampled the . Following the California pattern, the agan Valley, once a traditional farm- area, is developing a cuisine to go with lines.

our first day of wine touring, we left wna, which combines a pedestrian- ridly waterfront and mountain views

TWO WHEELS The valley is also a cycling center, on an abandoned section of the Kettle Valley Railway.



ONE PADDLE Lake Okanagan, the biggest of three lakes in the valley, is popular with kayakers.



SEVERAL GLASSES There are 120 wineries in the area; a tasting at Quail's Gate Estate.

Vancouver three years ago. Many of their ingredients come from their five-acre farm, which has organic pear and apple orchards. "It's still not a thriving food culture yet," Ms. Noble said, "but there is an emerging Okanagan cuisine." Two years ago they started making wine, and their school runs from June through September, ending when the wine harvest starts.

"It might be a new tourist area, but it's a real bounty of produce," Ms. Noble said as she led me past rows of beets to a red-painted smokehouse and outdoor kitchen. The lake, ever-present, sparkled winningly below.

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