

Rustic, chic converging in 'fruit basket'

► KELOWNA
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comfortably chic hotels have followed the wine, mountain bike trails and trendy clubs weren't far behind.

What makes Kelowna special is that you can indulge in all of these within a 5-mile radius.

Everywhere around town, people were hailing the city's paradoxical blend of bucolic and cosmopolitan ways of life. But the region is growing rapidly, and many are far from thrilled about it.

"I moved to this little spot to get away from it all," said Joe Kyle, a slender and talkative Calgary transplant who fled the city to come here in 1997. "Only it isn't such a little spot anymore."

New buildings sprout monthly, and the population recently broke six digits. Critics say development is running rampant, choking some of the region's most valuable land.

For Nikki and me, however, residents of the overcrowded Bay Area, Kelowna still seemed fresh, an invigorating blend of idyllic calm and hip modernity. It was the perfect spot to celebrate the end of the summer.

The Okanagan Valley — the name given by locals to the hills that surround the lake — has for centuries been British Columbia's fruit basket. In the 1900s, orchards of apples, peaches and plump plums dotted the undulating landscape all the way to the horizon. But as the booming apple industry across the border in Washington State drove competition up and prices down, local farmers started looking for ways to diversify and make ends meet. For many, the answer was wine.

The results, at first, were notably awful — largely because growers couldn't afford anything but hybrid vines. In the 1980s, however, after Canada's federal government agreed to subsidize the area's wine industry, everything changed. Growers planted *vitifera* vines, the kind used to make most of the world's fine wines. The local viticulture industry took off.

Today, most of the local wineries perch within a short bike ride of downtown, which Nikki and I discovered when we met with Ed Kruger, a local bike outfitter. Kruger picked us up one morning at the

Noirs are cultivated farther south, in an area considered to be Canada's only desert. The best boast a "VQA" seal, representing the Vintner's Quality Alliance.

For many in California, the notion that British Columbia can produce good wines — particularly sun-loving reds — takes some getting used to. But Kelowna is far from the gray drizzle of the coast, and daytime temperatures in summer average 80 degrees. It gets just 11 inches of rain a year.

In general, the whites we tasted were fruitier than their California counterparts, and the reds were bold and flavorful.

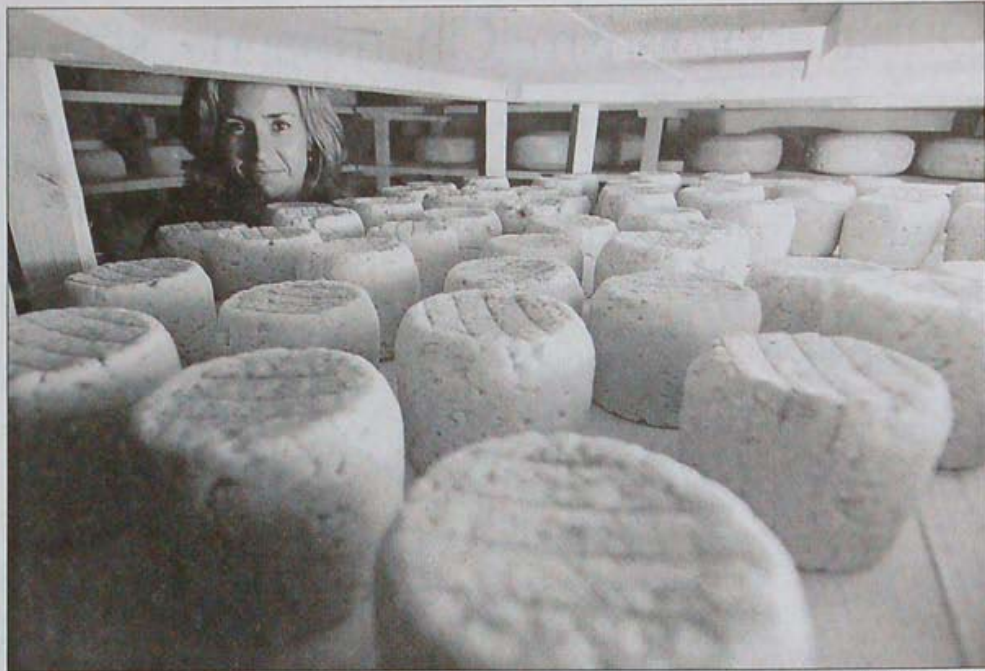
The wineries themselves boasted similar panache. At Quail's Gate Estate Winery, where the vineyards slope down to lake's edge, the tasting room was tasteful but rustic, a Pottery Barn catalog come to life. At Summerhill Estate Winery, after tasting a wonderfully delicate cuvee, we explored the cellar — a giant pyramid. Its New Age owner hoped the shape would somehow clarify the wine, and I was skeptical, especially when the guide urged us to form a circle, hold hands and "feel the energy." Still, I'll remember it long after the all the look-alike tasting rooms of the Napa Valley have merged in my mind into one.

Food follows wine

As Kelowna's wine industry has developed, so has its cuisine. Millions of years ago, melting glaciers left the valley with plateaus of fertile, mineral-rich soil. The bounty is varied: English peas, Jerusalem artichokes, Romano beans and more. On Saturdays, the local farmers' market makes the bazaar in front of San Francisco's Ferry Building look like a coffee klatch.

All of this fresh produce has transformed the area's culinary philosophy. In the past, restaurants would import vegetables from Vancouver Island and the United States, and use what they could until it spoiled. Today, with so many farms within walking distance of downtown, Kelowna's chefs have partnered with growers to build menus around the produce they select, harvest and purchase each day.

At a catering company called the Corked Cook, chef Geoffrey Couper said few of his vegetables



Carmelis Goat Cheese Artisan is one of the small Kelowna-area dairies that enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the region's wineries.

and cultivates a rainbow of red, orange, yellow and purple orbs.

At Waterfront Wines, a stylish, intimate downtown bistro and wine bar, we tasted the fruits of Djordjevič's labor. Our heirloom salad, topped with a sprinkling of local organic goat cheese, left Nikki and me moaning in delight. When chef Mark Filatow emerged from his closet-sized kitchen to collect our plate, he looked at us and laughed; nearly a dozen customers had ordered the salad that night, he said, and every one had reacted the same way.

The local attitude toward food and wine seems to owe a lot more to the French than the British, so it wasn't a big surprise to learn that the area's first European settlement was founded by a French missionary, Father Charles Pandosy, in the 1860s. Local streets still bear the names Cerise, d'Anjou and Gaston.

Today, Kelowna's lively downtown scene revolves around Bernard Avenue, a stretch of funky jewelry stores, decor shops and independent coffee shops. On a side street, my wife honed in on Blonde, a trendy boutique with clothing styled closer to SoHo than the Great White North.

How do Kelownans eat all that locally grown food, drink all that great local wine — and still fit into

what to savor the agreeable balance between city and country. The former is rapidly overtaking the latter. Recent estimates put Kelowna's population at 100,000, and the local Chamber of Commerce says that number will continue to grow. Cranes dot the horizon in nearly every direction.

Blame it on \$60-a-barrel oil. It's showered riches on neighboring Alberta — Canada's Texas — and people from Calgary are using their petrodollars to bid up prices on all those new vacation homes along Okanagan Lake. This influx is being greeted with the same sort of disdain that people in Oregon reserve for Californians coming north with their U-Hauls.

To some degree, the city has tried to control this development. In the downtown area, much of the new construction is high-rises, an effort to build up instead of out. Nevertheless, the region has sprawl. The drive into town from the airport is an excruciating journey on a thoroughfare littered with big-box stores. Elsewhere, out near the remaining orchards, the city has been buying up private land to build new roads.

One of our last nights in Kelowna, we met Ingo Grady, director of wine education at Mission Hill Winery. Sipping Pinot Gris on an open-air patio overlooking the

If you go

GETTING THERE

The Kelowna area is a four-hour drive from Vancouver. Kelowna International Airport is 15 minutes from downtown; Horizon Air, WestJet and Air Canada offer flights from Seattle and Victoria, British Columbia, among other cities.

WHERE TO STAY

Abbott by the Lake Bed & Breakfast, 1986 Abbott St. (250) 762-0221, www.abbottonthelake.com. On the beach a short walk from downtown. Big, cozy rooms, antique beds, spacious bathrooms. Doubles \$170-\$190 Canadian (about \$151-\$169 US) during high season, including breakfast.

Manteo Resort Waterfront Hotel & Villas, 3762 Lakeshore Road. (800) 445-5255, www.manteo.com. On the lakefront just south of Mission Creek. Gorgeous, modern rooms, comfy beds, serviceable bathrooms. Doubles \$155-\$280 (\$138-\$249 US), two-bedroom villas \$285-\$600 (\$254-\$534 US). On-site Wild Apple Grill restaurant offers eclectic cuisine.



and the Okanagan Valley. Patio seating in warm weather. Entrees \$15-\$25 (\$13-\$22 US).

WHAT TO DO

Monashee Adventure Tours, 1591 Highland Drive N. (250) 762-9253, www.monashee-adventuretours.com. Pony-tailed Ed Kruger guides half-day and full-day bike trips around Kelowna's farm belt. Includes all equipment, van transportation and, for most tours, lunch. \$100-\$150 (\$89-