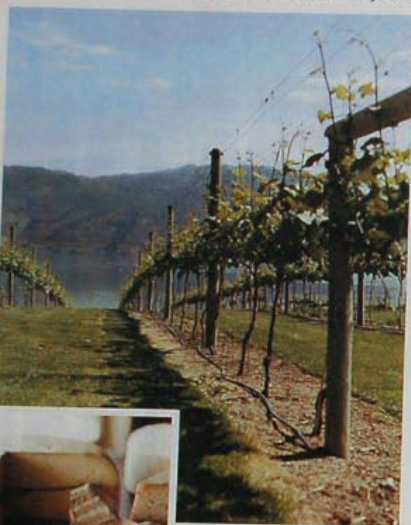


# wine okanagan valley

British Columbia's lake country is producing Pinot Noirs and Rieslings well worth tasting. Here, our wine expert's primer on the best way to explore the region—and which bottles to take home with you. By **Bruce Schoenfeld**



Canadian Classics Above: Chardonnay and Pinot grapes growing on the banks of Okanagan Lake, at Mission Hill Family Estate, in Westbank. Left: A selection from Carmel's Goat Cheese Artisan, a boutique dairy in Kelowna.



**DESTINATION** Okanagan Valley, British Columbia  
**WHEN TO GO** Fall, when farmers' markets brim with local produce and summer crowds have dispersed  
**GETTING THERE** Alaska Airlines offers five daily flights from Seattle, and Air Canada and WestJet have direct service from Calgary or Vancouver to Kelowna Airport (YLW). The valley's southern tip is three miles north of the U.S. border on Highway 97  
**INSIDER TIP** Some restaurants close during the winter, so be sure to call ahead

**WHERE IS IT?** The northernmost serious wine region in the world, the Okanagan Valley runs for 125 miles along a chain of lakes that stretches from Armstrong, British Columbia, south to the Washington border. The views are spectacular: Imagine Lake Tahoe as a backdrop for the Napa Valley. Pinot Noirs and Rieslings are the headliners, but producers offer everything from robust reds to ice wine.

**WHY GO NOW?** In 1995, the Okanagan had 26 wineries, and wines of variable quality. Now there are 74 wineries, and thanks to a slight rise in the average yearly temperature, most grape varieties can achieve full ripeness. There are only 5,300 acres of vines in the region—fewer acres than some individual producers own in California and Australia—so little Okanagan wine leaves Canada. All the more reason to have a taste at the wineries and to take some bottles home. Tourism has grown along with the wine industry, so many of the best dining options are at the wineries themselves, and each year, more properties are adding accommodations as well.

**THE STRATEGY** Base yourself in Kelowna. Ignore the motel-like sign and book a room at **Hotel Eldorado** (500 Cook Rd.; 866/608-7500; www.eldoradokelowna.com; doubles from \$88), a lakeside lodge with claw-foot bathtubs, fireplaces, cork floors, and a thriving bar. Try oat-crustured arctic char at **Fresco Restaurant & Lounge** (1560 Water St.; 250/868-8805; www.fresco-restaurant.net; dinner for two \$90), where Rod Butters—late of Vancouver Island's Wickaninnish Inn—has established himself as the area's top chef. In the morning, take a preemptive hike on the Mission Creek Greenway, then negate the benefits with croissants at **La Boulangerie** (100-3140 Lakeshore Rd.; 250/762-3466; breakfast for two \$1.75) or a picnic with a sweet, nutty parmesan or raw-milk chèvre from **Carmel's Goat Cheese Artisan** (170 Timberline Rd.; 250/470-0341; www.carmelsgoatcheese.com). From Carmel's, all the area's wineries are within a half-day's drive. »

Jonathan Sprague

## Winery Hopping

**CedarCreek** (5445 Lakeshore Rd.; 250/764-8866; www.cedarcreek.bc.ca) comes alive each summer with a sunset concert series and a restaurant serving game sausages and other wine-friendly food at lunch. But CedarCreek's ripe, high-acid Ehrenfelser, made from an obscure Riesling-Sylvaner cross and crafted by ponytailed Californian Tom DiBello, is available to taste anytime.

**Mission Hill Family Estate** (1730 Mission Hill Rd., Westbank; 250/768-6448; www.missionhillwinery.com), a modern take on old-world architecture, is one of the most impressive wineries anywhere—a reported \$26 million investment by the owner of Mike's Hard Lemonade—set on a rise above Okanagan Lake. Shakespeare is performed in an amphitheater, private dinners are served beneath a Chagall tapestry, and a gorgeous kitchen doubles as a cooking-class studio. The wines, such as the fragrant yet crisp Five Vineyards Pinot Blanc, can't match the splendor of their setting, but they come close. Bottle for bottle, no Canadian property is more accomplished.

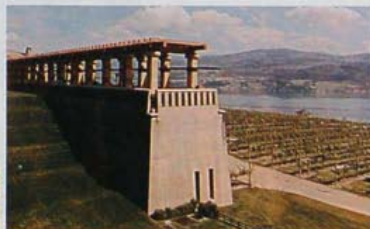
**Nk'Mip Cellars** (1400 Rancher Creek Rd., Osoyoos; 250/495-2985; www.nkmipcellars.com), owned and operated by the Osoyoos Indian Band in a joint venture with national powerhouse Vincor Canada, sits on a lakefront a mile from the Washington border. Recently, 44 Santa Fe-style villas, outfitted with flat-screen TVs and Aveda toiletries, have sprung from the soil (doubles from \$230), along with a nine-hole golf course and the Desert & Heritage Centre. The wines are less ambitious than the resort amenities, but they're improving by the vintage. The 2005 Riesling, made from 25-year-old vines, is as gummy and minerally as a Riesling ought to be.

**Quails' Gate Estate Winery** (3303 Boucherie Rd.; 250/769-4451; www.quailsgate.com) winemaker Grant Stanley grew up in Vancouver and New Zealand, and his whites split the difference between the tropical-fruit notes of a Kiwi bottling and the floral aromatics typical of the Okanagan region. His 2001 Reserve Pinot Noir is particularly stylish. The new glass-and-cedar Old Vines Patio Restaurant overlooking Okanagan Lake serves imaginative seafood dishes, and a 10-unit inn is in the works. ♦



## What to Bring Back

Wine shipped across the border may be delayed by customs. Ask for Styrofoam shippers so bottles can be safely checked. Or drive across the border; tariffs are minimal. ♦ **CedarCreek's Estate Select Chardonnay 2004** (\$19) isn't over-oaked, over-extracted, or over-anything. ♦ **Mission Hill Family Estate's S.L.C. Syrah 2002** (\$36) has come of age in its fifth vintage and might be the valley's most polished bottle of red. ♦ Sweet but not unctuous, **Nk'Mip Cellar's Qwam Qwmt Riesling Ice Wine 2005** (\$53) is a worthy sibling to the renowned bottles of Vincor Canada properties Inniskillin and Jackson-Triggs. ♦ A superior example of this underappreciated grape, **Quails' Gate Estate Winery's Limited Release Chenin Blanc 2004** (\$17) has high-toned lemon flavors.



Wine Country Pleasures Clockwise from far left: An afternoon at the beach in Sunset City Park, in Kelowna; the terrace at Mission Hill winery's restaurant; Dungeness crab "cappuccino soup" at Fresco Restaurant, in downtown Kelowna; the sun sets over Okanagan Lake.