

PLANNING A
WINE COUNTRY
ADVENTURE?
HERE'S ANOTHER
GREAT VALLEY
FOR YOU.

By Bruce Schoenfeld

The most magnificent winery in North America is not in Napa or Sonoma or even Walla Walla. It sits poised on a hillside in southern British Columbia, with a commanding view of shimmering Okanagan Lake below. An architectural cross between a monastery and a postmodern Tuscan castle, Mission Hill Family Estate was built at great expense—some say \$30 million, others \$40 million—by Anthony von Mandl, a Vancouver wine importer and entrepreneur who'd struck gold with the pop libation Mike's Hard Lemonade. Its arched entrance was hand-chiseled from a five-ton limestone block. Bells cast by the renowned French foundry Paccard nestle in a 12-story tower, and a Chagall tapestry

Napa, Willamette, Okanagan

Vines march in ranks through the central Okanagan Valley in British Columbia.

adorns a reception room. ¶ Years ago, von Mandl considered investing in Napa. But rather than become “the 1,800th winery in California,” as he says, he chose to make a statement outside the quiet city of Kelowna, four hours east of Vancouver, in a climatologically challenged viticultural region known for peaches, glorious vistas, and the occasional potable riesling. Not surprisingly, siting his winery there was deemed an act of folly when von Mandl PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREA JOHNSON

announced his plans in 1998. Lately, though, Mission Hill has become a symbol of the Okanagan Valley's arrival as a world-class destination for wine and food.

To anyone making the spectacular lakeside drive to Kelowna from the U.S. border two hours south, the boom is evident. Vineyards seem to be everywhere that pine trees and rock formations aren't. The region has grown from 32 wineries in 1995 to more than 80 now, nearly all of them open to visitors. (Calling ahead is a good idea.) Hotels are springing up, and half a dozen inns or rentable condo compounds—many with vineyard views—have been built or are being planned at wineries.

I've roamed the Okanagan three times in as many years, most recently last October. I ate roulade of chicken breast with popcorn foam, followed by steamed black cod with warm apples, followed by braised rabbit with cinnamon and nutmeg—and nearly every major ingredient was local. I stayed at a new resort, the Cove, that has vaulted ceilings and flat-screen televisions but remains well priced for U.S. visitors despite the muscularity of the Canadian dollar. I toured Burrowing Owl, an exquisite 11-room inn surrounded by grapevines. And I savored a range of wines—a brisk chenin blanc from Quails' Gate, an earthy pinot noir from Tantalus, and robust merlots from Le Vieux Pin—that far outclassed anything I'd tasted before from the Okanagan.

The region's residents have caught the fever. At the local outpost of Joey's Global Grill, a Vancouver-based chain, two dozen Okanagan Valley wines are featured. I came on a Monday at noon, munched a fish taco while sipping a floral \$8 gewürztraminer from Sumac Ridge, and saw a table full of office workers enjoying a bottle of local pinot gris. Down valley in Penticton, a quirky Greek restaurant called Theo's offers a choice of more than 100 local wines to pair with its rustic rabbit, lamb shoulder, and even braised calamari.

I stopped at Cedar Creek winery one afternoon during the Okanagan Fall Wine Festival. Held annually in late September or early October, it includes themed wine dinners at most of the region's best restaurants, usually starring a single producer,



ABOVE, wine talk flows easily in Mission Hill's cellar. LEFT, chef Bernard Casavant keeps dishes local at the Sonora Room.



and it attracts crowds—or what pass for crowds—with its welcoming wineries and accessible vintners. A dozen or so visitors were browsing Cedar Creek's gift shop and tasting bar, sampling inspired oddities such as a deliciously crisp white wine made from a local grape called ehrenfelser and talking up food and drink in a way that would have seemed inconceivable even a few years ago.

That night, during an ambitious dinner at Fresco in downtown Kelowna, Quails' Gate wines took center stage. I'd met the talented Rod Butters, Fresco's chef and owner, when he cooked at the Wickaninnish Inn on Vancouver Island more than a decade ago. Now, between lecturing the room on the science of popcorn foam and putting the last touches on an entrée of braised veal cheek, he rhapsodized about the region. "Chefs are coming now from Whistler and Calgary, and they're coming for a reason," said Butters, who serves as chair and head cheerleader of the Okanagan Chefs Association. "I see it as validation."

Butters noted the arrival of Bernard Casavant as chef at the

Sonora Room in Burrowing Owl's mission-style winery at the far end of the valley. Sure enough, a standout dish of my visit was Casavant's seared halibut with Tofino shrimp, served beside a mineraly pinot gris. Burrowing Owl's owner, Jim Wyse, has now decided to keep the restaurant open year-round.

Not far away, I came on a boutique winery taking a similar chance. Le Vieux Pin is located in a cottage that could have been imported from Bordeaux's Pomerol district if the paint weren't quite so fresh. Inside, jazz singer Madeleine Peyroux played on the sound system as proprietor Anthony Burée showed off the 2005s—his first vintage—including two merlots that sell for as much as \$65 a bottle. A 2006 cabernet franc had room-filling aromatics and the thrilling concentration—a silky texture on the tongue—usually found only in wines from warmer regions. I'd never had a better Canadian wine.

Does the world need another \$100 cabernet, which is where Le Vieux Pin seems to be heading? Perhaps not, but von Mandl insists that the Okanagan—with just 7,000 acres of vines—gets a lift from such big-cachet wines.

I ate lunch with him on the terrace at Mission Hill. It had been a changeable day—hail had just fallen, causing panic among vineyard managers who weren't done harvesting—but now a sky of cornflower blue had spread over the lake. Each dish chef Michael Allemeier sent out had the composition of a still life and the vibrancy of ingredients that clearly hadn't traveled far—cheeses, for instance, from cows and goats just a few miles away. As we sipped pitch-perfect riesling and looked out on the whitecapped lake below, I realized there was nowhere else I would have wanted to be. ●

BRUCE SCHOENFELD also writes for the *New York Times Magazine*, *Travel & Leisure*, and *Tennis*.



MAP: NEIL GOWER

If you're going . . .

Pick up the *Western Canada & Alaska TourBook* and the *Western States & Provinces* map. The **Okanagan Fall Wine Festival**, held Oct. 2 through 12 this year, is an 11-day harvest celebration with lunches and dinners, vineyard tours, tastings, and other events. For more details, visit owfs.com. Area code is 250 except as noted.

EATS & SIPS

Burrowing Owl Estate Winery and the Sonora Room 100 Burrowing Owl Place, Oliver, (877) 498-0620, bovwine.ca. **Cedar Creek Estate Winery** 5445 Lakeshore Rd., Kelowna, 764-8866, cedarcreek.bc.ca. **Fresco Restaurant & Lounge** 1560 Water St., Kelowna, 868-8805, frescorestaurant.net. **Le Vieux Pin** 34070 73rd St., Oliver, 498-8388, levieuxpin.com. **Mission Hill Family Estate and the Terrace** 1730 Mission Hill Rd., Westbank, 768-6448, missionhillwinery.com. **Quails' Gate Estate Winery and Old Vines Restaurant** 3303 Boucherie Rd., Kelowna, 769-2500, quailsgate.com. **Theo's Restaurant** 687 Main St., Penticton, 492-4019, eatsquid.com. **Waterfront Wines Restaurant & Wine Bar** 1180 Sunset Dr., No. 104, Kelowna, 979-1222, waterfrontwines.com.

SLEEPS

Best Western Inn From \$129. 2402 Hwy. 97 N., Kelowna, (888) 860-1212, bestwesternkelowna.com. **The Cove Lakeside Resort From** \$145. 4205 Gellatly Rd., Westbank, (877) 762-2683, covelakeside.com. **Guest House at Burrowing Owl From** \$175 (see Eats & Sips). **Manteo Resort From** \$160. 3762 Lakeshore Rd., Kelowna, 860-1031, manteo.com.

BEYOND THE VINEYARDS

The Okanagan to go

Need a break from two-fisted wining and dining? The Okanagan Valley offers plenty of other pleasures to pursue, both indoors and out. And no matter where you go, lake vistas are all but guaranteed. Area code is 250 except as noted.

Browse

Kelowna's waterfront district has six blocks of galleries, theaters, and museums in old warehouses (kelownasculturaldistrict.com).

Unearth treasures at Turtle Island Gallery (717-8235, turtleislandgallery.com) and at the Art Ark Gallery (862-5080, theartark.com).

Luxuriate

Indulge in plant-based skin treatments and four types of massage at Heirloom Spa, one amenity of Naramata Heritage Inn & Spa in the village of Naramata. (866) 617-1188, naramatainn.com.

Hike

In Kelowna, shady Mission Creek Greenway (469-6232, greenway.kelowna.bc.ca) follows a stream to Father Pandosy Mission, built in 1859. In Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park (548-0076, env.gov.bc.ca/bc_parks), trails crisscross arid hillsides and traverse calm forests of cedar and fir.

Learn

In Osoyoos, at the Desert Centre, stroll a mile-long boardwalk as guides note flora and fauna of Canada's only desert—a tip of the dry Sonoran life zone, which reaches into Mexico. 495-2470, www.desert.org.

Kayak

Paddle past Knox Mountain, watch for birds along the lakeshore, or picnic on a secluded beach—such as Paul's Tomb. Rent at Lakefront Sports Centre, Kelowna (862-2469, lakefrontsports.com) or at Castaways Watersports in Penticton (490-2033, castawayswatersports.com).

Sail

Hire a sailboat from Go with the Wind Cruises (763-5204, gowiththewind.com). Captain Al Cotton will deliver you to secret swimming coves and key spots for wild-life viewing while he spouts local lore.

Swim

Friendly beaches are easy to find in Kelowna and in Penticton. For a beachfront dotted with barbecue grills and picnic tables, check out Bertram Creek Regional Park, just 7.5 miles south of Kelowna. 469-6140, regionaldistrict.com/departments/parks.

—ERIN KLENOW