

Wining and dining in the Okanagan

Hidden paradise of wineries and farm-to-fork restaurants aims to spoil travellers with choice

Mhairri Woodhall

SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

We arrived at our bed and breakfast in the Naramata Bench after a leisurely lunch of hand-pulled pizza, summer greens and plenty of wine at The Pecking Room — Red Rooster Winery's al fresco kitchen.

Steve, an expat from London who owns Benchmark B&B with his wife Gail, greeted us warmly and quickly.

What a magical setting. Lake views stretch across the expansive property. Two-person circular chaises with crimson cushions rest on the vibrant green lawn, enticing guests to lose themselves in the postcard-perfect scene. A large saltwater pool runs parallel to the lake, while the hot tub, crowned with red fabric panels, is tucked at the south end of the garden for privacy.

My mind was spinning as I devoured the view.

I've travelled to the Okanagan countless times, so how could I have missed this paradise?

A few kilometres north of Penticton, perched above the eastern shores of Lake Okanagan you'll find Naramata. It's a tight-knit community, bursting with family-run vineyards, orchards and wineries.

With more than 25 wineries in the region, we were spoiled for choice.

To simplify our decision-making we brought in an expert — Meryl Van Duyn from Romancing the Wine Tours.

We selected a custom tour, which included some wineries of our choosing and some handpicked by Meryl.

My husband's affinity for fruit wines ensured Elephant Island made the cut. Proprietor Miranda's grandmother Catherine purchased the orchard-turned-winery in the early seventies. We had our tasting on the patio — a few tables over



The relaxing Spa Tranquila is a perfect place to unwind after a day of wine touring. CURT WOODHALL

from the kids play area (brilliant). I favour dry whites, but quickly fell in love with the tart Black Current and the Pink Elephant sparkling. We purchased more bottles here than at any other winery on the trip.

Wine country inspires romance, and nobody can attest to that more than Gavin and Shana Miller of Upper Bench Winery and Creamery. This is a couple I'd welcome at every party I throw. Award-winning winemaker Gavin and his wife Sha-

na, an equally distinguished cheese maker, have united foodie forces to offer the ultimate pairing.

We chose a wine flight and cheese platter on the patio. The signature creamy Gold, Stilton style King Cole and silky smooth Grey Baby were enjoyed immensely with their significant others — Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Merlot. It's no wonder that U&B's quarterly Curds & Corks Club is such a success.

Many of the Naramata Bench winer-

ies have excellent farm-to-fork restaurants, and we endeavoured to try almost all of them.

We lunched at The Patio at Lake Breeze, dining on mushroom bruschetta and spaghetti to offset our many tastings. Lunch at The Vanilla Pod at Poplar Grove (one of my favourite wineries) is also exceptional both in beauty and flavour.

The summer sipper Blanc de Noir and charcuterie plate was a lovely interruption from the strenuous

task of wine touring.

Throughout our time in Naramata there were two winery restaurants that received praise from almost everyone we met. Hillside Winery is one of them.

The charming timber building, inspired by a gristmill design, overlooks exquisite gardens.

On the upper bistro patio we feasted on red wine braised short rib and steamed mussels in Tom Yum broth. After, while watching the sunset, we worked through a Lemon Buttermilk Pudding Cake.

Liquidity, in neighbouring Okanagan Falls, is also the talk of the town and was highly recommended to us by one of Benchmark's guests, while we chatted over our three-course gourmet breakfast.

Entering the recently opened bistro feels like stepping into a modern gallery. First the artwork captured my attention, then the view.

The contemporary estate winery sits atop a rolling hillside of vineyards, with Vaseux Lake in the horizon. Executive chef Rob Walker's culinary presentation captures the essence of the winery, as every dish served was artistic perfection.

With Naramata's endless lake views it's a crime to not take a closer look, and Pier Water Sports in Penticton offers pontoon boat rentals on Okanagan Lake.

For a takeaway lunch, pick up picnic provisions from Bench Market (a local institution for weekend brunch), or house-made salads and sandwiches from Brodo Kitchen.

After cruising the lake, we spent the afternoon at Spa Tranquila, where couples' massages are offered on a serenity patio outside.

Wine touring in Naramata lasts well into October, with the annual Fall Wine Festival commencing at the beginning of that month.

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