



## VALLEY OF FINE VINTAGES

### Growers in Okanagan find sun and soil to reward their experiments with excellence and tourists

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WEST KELOWNA, British Columbia — Some places seem to have all the luck. Take the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, with its sinuous blue lake, green hillsides, bright high-latitude sunlight, hot summers, and surprisingly rich soils. As if that weren't enough, it all comes together to create great wine.

It's easy to appreciate the Okanagan Valley's charms from the Terrace Restaurant at Mission Hill Family Estate winery. As we ate salads of local August tomatoes and sipped glasses of pinot blanc, we looked down the steep vineyard rows to the lake. It's the Okanagan experience in a nutshell.

Built on the foundations of a 1966 winery, Mission Hill is one of the oldest and largest in the valley, a region that wine specialists considered a jug-wine district at best when Vancouver wine merchant Anthony von Mandl bought the estate in 1981. But the skeptics were wrong. Today there are more than 125 wineries and the Okanagan Valley has become one of the most exciting frontiers in quality winemaking. Like all frontiers, it has lured its share of big thinkers and dreamers.

With its mix of Italianate and modern architecture and its perch above the west side of Okanagan Lake, Mission Hill is one of the largest and most beautiful of the Okanagan wineries.

Its elegant style, open-air restaurant, outdoor concert amphitheater, and outstanding wines bring a taste of Napa-style touring to the area. Mission Hill's flagship Oculus, a Bordeaux-style blend, is considered by many the valley's premier wine.

From West Kelowna, the wine-growing region extends 75 miles south where it overlaps the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert, complete with rattlesnakes and scorpions. The drive along Route 97 is like a slalom down a cornucopia. The highway hugs the lake's shores, sometimes rising to bluffs above the north-south crevasse, then swooping down so close that wind whips up a spray. At melodically named villages — Peachland, Summerland — side roads zigzag into the uplands where vineyards and orchards stretch out along the tablelands.

Before we hit the road, we had only to drive across a bridge to visit the idiosyncratic Summerhill Pyramid Winery in Kelowna, where a sculpture of a giant wine bottle pouring out of the sky is the valley's favorite photo op. Ever since New York real estate developer Stephen Cipes established the winery in 1987, Summerhill has forged its own path, and claims to be the first certified biodynamic winery in British Columbia. Vineyard operations follow biodynamic principles that blend microbiology and New Age mysticism, and wines are "clarified" in a

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**Top:** Terrace Restaurant at Mission Hill Family Estate in West Kelowna, B.C.; a tiny salad there of fire-peeled cherry tomatoes, blueberries, prosciutto, and sour-dough toasts; and Derke Uhlemann, executive chef at Covert Farms in Oliver, examines grapes at McIntyre Bluff.



PHOTOS BY DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE