

A culinary cut above

BY PAUL J. HENDERSON, THE TIMES OCTOBER 15, 2010

The Fraser Valley is well-known as the breadbasket of the province and the Okanagan certainly leads the way in British Columbia's wine industry.

But Vancouver Island's Cowichan Valley is a fabulous place to pick up culinary delicacies--from oceanside oysters to mountain morels--and has a growing number of successful wineries.

For those not from the island, the best part of a visit to the Cowichan Valley is its proximity to Victoria and the capital city's stunning hotels and mouth-watering restaurants.

On a recent birthday weekend trip with my forever-young wife and our new baby girl, we cruised out of the Fraser Valley on Saturday, over to Schwartz Bay and headed straight to the Magnolia Hotel & Spa in downtown Victoria.

The Magnolia is a quaint, well-appointed boutique hotel steps from anything you'd ever want to be steps from--the harbour, restaurants, shopping and, if you are so inclined, even the legislature.

We checked into a large corner room with views of the Empress, the leg and the harbour. The king-sized bed, luxurious sheets, fireplace, classy office desk and wet bar added style and panache.

(Of course, the play pen took some of that away again, but we're used to it.)

After settling in, we headed down to the Prime Steakhouse, a popular downtown location for couples and business bigwigs right off Magnolia's lobby.

When I think steakhouse, I frankly have a hard time getting excited beyond, well, steak. But Prime is much more and for days after we were still talking about the clam and mussel appetizer special that had us filling up on bread to soak up the sauce. My wife also had Qualicum scallops with lemon cream and leek and chives, and I had the herb-crusted rack of lamb with red wine jus with juniper gastrique. I don't know what a "gastrique" is and I don't care--delicious.

Having a gourmet meal in a restaurant downstairs from a well-appointed room proved particularly convenient when the baby got a little (more) restless, and so my wife had to have her chocolate molten lake dessert sent up to the room. Tough life, eh?

Sunday morning, after a buffet breakfast in the daylight-lit Prime restaurant, we packed up the gang and headed out on the short drive for a tour around the sixth annual Cowichan Wine & Culinary Festival.



The nice legs of one of Averill Creek's vintages at the Cowichan Wine & Culinary Festival. The Cowichan Valley is increasingly becoming known for quality wines.

Photograph by: Paul J. Henderson, TIMES

First stop was Averill Creek Vineyard at the north end of Duncan situated on a hillside with stunning views of the valley and Cowichan Bay. We sampled their 2007 Prevost and the 2008 Pinot Noir, but the best grapes here--and from what I've read, all over the Cowichan Valley--are the whites.

The climate in the Cowichan Valley is sometimes called Mediterranean--a slight exaggeration to be sure but the unique temperatures are as much as 10 degrees warmer than Nanaimo to the north and Victoria to the south. This produces great grigio, gris and gewurztraminer grapes.

Next up, we drove back down towards the bay and along the quaint Seaside Village of Cowichan Bay to the rolling hillside farm of Hilary's Cheese, where booths from a number of other local food producers were set up.

We tried freshly caught and sauteed spot prawn skewers from Cowichan Bay Seafood. There was an incredibly rich wild mushroom (chanterelle, morel, lobster, etc.) stew made with the crop from Untamed Feast. And, of course, some incredible cheeses from Hilary's including a soft cheese with a washed rind using blackberry port from Cherry Point Estate Wines down the road, and a variety of delightfully sharp blues and decadent cream cheeses.

After Hilary's we headed to Cherry Point for more vino sampling where we were once again swept away by the high quality whites, particularly the Ortega-Siegerrebe blend, which we had to take home. Local artisans had their wares on display and the Spanish owner of Cherry Point was serving up samples of his homemade paella to visitors. (And if dessert wines are your thing, both Cherry Point and Averill Creek have widely-acclaimed blackberry ports.)

After Cherry Point we headed up to Organic Fair Inc., a rustic little farm producing high quality organic fair trade chocolate, spices and teas. Everyone will be getting chocolate bars for Christmas from us.

So after a day of wines, cheeses, mushrooms, more wines and then chocolate, we loped back over the Malahat to our comfortable nest at the Magnolia.

A culinarily stimulating day right in our own backyard.

IF YOU GO:

W Magnolia Hotel & Spa, Victoria's four-diamond, European-style luxury boutique hotel, is a great place to start your tour of the Island's wineries. The Magnolia caters to business and vacation travellers, along with their pets. Don't forget to check out Spa Magnolia, a full-service AVEDA spa that offers personalized treatments to rebalance, rejuvenate and refresh. Find out more at www.magnoliahotel.com.

- For more on other stops visit: www.averillcreek.ca, www.cherrypointvineyards.com,
www.hilarycheese.com and www.organicfair.com.

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