

# One 'Grape escape' on Vancouver Island

## Victoria's Magnolia hotel a starting point for adventures north in Cobble Hill

BY BEAU SIMPSON, SPECIAL TO SURREY NOW    OCTOBER 12, 2010

As far as invites go, it was a good one.

"Not willing to let summer fade away?" the email read. "Are you a wine lover who likes adventure off the beaten track? Then this is your opportunity to create an unforgettable escape."

They had me at wine.

And so, my lovely girlfriend Kari and I headed to the Island for a weekend of wines and dines. Eager for a weekend away from the hustle and bustle of Lower Mainland life, we embarked for what was being billed as the "Grape Escape."

And what an escape it was.

Even the ferry ride seemed like an escape to us -- still no orca sightings though (I swear, one day I'll see them from a ferry.)

Once in Victoria, we checked into the Magnolia Hotel & Spa, which hosted us for two nights and arranged a self-guided tour of some of the Island's award-winning wineries and cider houses. It gets better; we just so happened to visit the Island during the weekend of the Cowichan Valley Wine Festival.

Good timing on my part, if I must say.

Magnolia is right downtown -- just steps away from the inner harbour -- and despite being only a decade old, the boutique hotel has a cool historic vibe to it.

Bill Lewis and staff were very accommodating and made sure we knew which wineries to check out and exactly how to get there (despite frustrating hand-made signs along the highway that kept getting us lost).

First stop: Merridale Ciderworks. We didn't stay long but we arrived at this charming cidery just in time for a tasting. Kari loved the glasses but hated the cider. I liked it, though -- it's something different. You can have your standard red wine anytime. I like the idea of serving something unique for dinner. My favourite was what they call Scrumpy cider -- not for the faint of heart though. Very earthy, Scotch-like. I liked the charm and uniqueness of Merridale but Kari was more in the mood for some good, bold reds -- so off we went.



A weekend away from the hustle and bustle of Lower Mainland life is sometimes just what the doctor ordered — especially when award-winning wineries are involved.

**Photograph by:** Paul Henderson, For the Now

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Just down the road, we found a quaint little winery near Cowichan Lake called Silverside Farm. If you like berry wines, this is the place for you. My drink of choice was the Tayberry wine, an intense wine made from -- you guessed it -- the tayberry, which is basically a cross between a raspberry and a blackberry. Dessert wines aren't my cup of tea but I gave them a shot and found that I actually enjoyed a few.

But we had yet to find Kari's precious full-bodied red.

And we found it at Cherry Point Estates, just a few minutes northeast of us.

Cherry Point was hopping -- lots of cars, lots of music and lots of wines (they even served up a great paella, free of charge). We started with the whites but I knew Kari was getting impatient for that red because she kept eyeing the next bottle (they served the wine from lightest to boldest).

Not surprisingly, the last bottle finally satisfied her need for a full-bodied wine.

Bête Noire is made from a unique Hungarian varietal called Agria, a dark-skinned grape with robust flavours of black currants and cherries.

Whatever it was made from, and however you pronounce it, one thing we knew for sure -- this is what we came for.

So, full of wine, paella and Island ciders, we headed back to the Magnolia eager to crack into the bottle of red from a winery we didn't get to visit that was left for us in the room before hitting the town.

Grape Escape, eh? Is that what they're calling it?

A pretty good name, if you ask me.

#### IF YOU GO

- 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. I highly recommend the spa's facial treatments. The Magnolia Hotel & Spa, 623 Courtney St., Victoria. Reservations: 1-877-MAGNOLIA (624-6654).

- Merridale Ciderworks is located on the southeast coast of Vancouver Island, about 40 minutes north of Victoria and 80 minutes south of Nanaimo. Try the Scrumpy Cider. You'll love it, especially if you like

Scotch. Merridale Ciderworks, 1230 Merridale Rd., Cobble Hill, 1-250-743-4293.

- Situated at the south end of the Cowichan Valley, Silverside Farm and Winery produces berry wines and fortified (port style) dessert wines. Silverside also offers jams, jellies and fruit vinegars made right there on the farm. Silverside Farm, 3810 Cobble Hill Rd., Cobble Hill, 1-877-743-9149.

- Great wines and a killer Spanish paella can be found at Cherry Point Estate Wines, 840 Cherry Point Rd., Cobble Hill.

- B.C. Ferries -- Hey, you have to get on the boat to get there, and the trip from Tsawwassen to Victoria is always awesome. Customer information and reservations: 1-888-BC FERRY or online at [bcferries.com](http://bcferries.com).

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