



B.C. wineries bearing organic fruit

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I decided that I liked Forbidden Fruit wine before I had actually tasted it. Or, for that matter, even seen it. I liked the very idea of it. Wine called Pearsuasion, Impearfection, Crushed Innocence and Pomme Desirée. Wine made from organically grown fruit in an organically inclined valley in a desert-like corner of southern British Columbia. It sounded like yoga for the palate.

It sounded like a good excuse for a visit to the Similkameen Valley, where I had heard that some new, family-run wineries were turning out stellar wines, from both tree fruits and grapes.

The Similkameen, just west of the southern Okanagan Valley and near the Washington state border, is the sort of spot that appealed to free spirits and back-to-the-landers in the 1960s and 70s. In many ways, not much has changed. The valley is still authentically rural and wholeheartedly organic, claiming the highest concentration of organic growers in Canada.

It's no surprise that the wine and grape fever that is burning through the Okanagan is inching into the neighbouring Similkameen, but this valley will probably blaze its own trail. While the Okanagan's spiffiest wineries have made the pages of Wine Spectator magazine, the Similkameen scene is more Mother Earth News.

The south Similkameen, where the vineyards are clustered, looks like a place you would hear about in the lyrics of a country song: steep mountains and dry, windswept ranchlands where cattle poke around in sagebrush.

In the community of Cawston (about 1,000 people and two fruit-packing plants, including the only 100-per-cent organic fruit-packing plant in the province), I followed a side road to the Herder Winery, where winemaker Lawrence Herder was developing a new blend of chardonnay, pinot gris, viognier and gewurztraminer.

Herder, a Californian, studied winemaking and viticulture at Fresno State and used to own a winery in California. When he and his wife, Sharon, moved to B.C. and started scouting about for a site to set up shop, they zeroed in on the Similkameen Valley.

“We took a chance on an area that, at the time, was not so popular,” Sharon said, noting that when the Herders opened their doors in 2004, the valley had only two wineries (Crownsnest Vineyards, just around the corner on Surprise Drive, and St. Laszlo Estate, in nearby Keremeos).

The Herder winery is small – a discreetly sophisticated Venetian yellow building that might have morphed out of the surrounding hillsides. You have to look twice to spot the sign by the side of the road. But that hasn’t stopped wine lovers from ferreting out the wines, which have already attained cult status.

Sharon tells the story of an early visitor to the tasting room who took notes on everything he sampled. “It intimidated me right away.”

The visitor, who when asked where he was from mentioned that he had a little restaurant and B&B on Vancouver Island, turned out to be Sinclair Philip, owner of the internationally acclaimed Sooke Harbour House. He ordered 15 cases of Herder’s first vintage.

High-end restaurants in B.C. also feature wines from another small Similkameen winery that caught the attention of connoisseurs from the get-go.

John Weber, a teacher from Saskatchewan, and his wife, Virginia, a nurse, moved to Cawston about six years ago and bought a vineyard. To house their winery, they had initially hoped to get their hands on a historic log building that once functioned as a Hudson’s Bay Company trading post.

“We wanted something unique,” John said.

When that plan fell through, they started looking into straw-bale construction. “The more we researched it, the more we knew it was right.”

The Webers opened Canada’s first straw-bale winery in 2005, calling it Orofino, after a mountain behind the vineyard. When you turn off the main highway in Cawston and head up the hill, past the Amber Light grocery, Orofino appears, mirage-like, among neighbouring orchards.

“The locals like it,” John said. “It fits the personality of the valley.”

Built by 22 participants in a straw-bale workshop, the winery features a tasting area and barrel room, connected by a breezeway.

While the Webers and the Herders are relatively new to the Similkameen, the owners of the Forbidden Fruit Winery, which opened last summer, are valley pioneers. Kim Brind’Amour and Steve Venables have been growing organic fruit trees on a farm south of Cawston since 1977.

“It was a movement back then,” said Kim, when I tracked her down in the wine shop. “Raising kids on clean farms.”

The name Forbidden Fruit refers to the fact that initially, both organic farming and fruit wines were less accepted (by orchardists and wine lovers, respectively) than they are today.

“It also comes from the idea that we live in the Garden of Eden,” she said, pouring me a sample of Adam’s Apple, a table wine made from six varieties of organic apples.

Brind’Amour and Venables grow apricots, peaches, cherries, apples, pears and plums on a handsome 147-acre spread near the banks of the Similkameen River. Their wine, which along with pear and apple table wines includes several dessert wines, is made with the help of a fruit wine specialist and has won numerous awards.

I picked up my glass of Adam’s Apple and took a sip: crisp, fresh, luscious. The wine had another quality that took me a few minutes to nail down. I was familiar with the idea of terroir, in the context of grape wine, and knew that it had to do with a marriage of soil and growing conditions that give a wine personality, but my understanding of how that

translated into flavour was vague. Until now. The wine in my glass was loaded with terroir. It was so original. So natural. So Similkameen.