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FOODSERVICE *and* Hospitality

Canada's Hospitality Business Magazine

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Raise a Glass

Come for the wine and stay for
the weekend at Canada's top wineries

Burrumbidgee's
Wyse family hosts
the good life
in Oliver, B.C.



FIELD OF DREAMS: Burrowing Owl's Chris Wyse (left) and his father Jim enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Vine and Dine

Many of Canada's top wineries offer more than a great glass of Gamay // BY MARGARET SWAINE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDALL COSCO

Most wineries are content to create miracles in the cellar. Some extend beyond wine to proffer picnics on their patios, fine dining on premises or retail sales of local farmers' produce. A select few brazenly offer the Full Monty to culinary tourists, namely in accommodations, food and wine. Such is the case with Cave Spring in Jordan, Ont., Nk'Mip in Osoyoos, B.C., and Burrowing Owl in nearby Oliver, B.C. They are success stories many might like to emulate, if only they had the recipe, and healthy dollops of guts, and business savvy.

CAVE DWELLERS

Founded in 1986 by the Pennachetti family and winemaker Angelo Pavan, Cave Spring is one of the Niagara Peninsula's leading vintners of premium wines. Still very much a family business, it all began in 1978 when John Pennachetti and son Len were among the first to plant vinifera vines in the area. Riesling and Chardonnay may seem obvious grapes for Niagara today, but at the time the decision to plant them was daring.

"There were basically just a handful of experimental vinifera plots back then," says Tom Pennachetti, Len's brother and a managing partner in



REGIONAL BIAS: (from top left) The Cave clan in their natural element; grapes grow in abundance along the Niagara Escarpment; new tasting room at Cave Spring.

Cave Spring. The Riesling vines, purchased from the German nursery Weis Reben on the Mosel River, revealed a commitment to cultivating quality wines, but also a commitment of another kind. The Weis family, who own Germany's St. Urbans Hof Winery, saw an opportunity to start up a winery (Vineland Estates) in Niagara. Anne Weis came to work for the family business here and really put down roots. She married Tom Pennachetti.

Today, Cave Spring controls more than 70 hectares of vineyards on two coveted sites along the Niagara Escarpment, known locally as the Beamsville Bench and the Twenty Mile Bench. Justly proud of their vineyards, the Pennachettis and winemaker Poven will happily bend your ear for hours about the glacial-till limestone, shale and sandstone soils, the sloping cliffs that create a unique microclimate, and the density of their plantings. Their wines tell the same tale by consistently delivering high quality, notably in their flagship varietals, Riesling and Chardonnay. Well-made wines from other varietals round out the portfolio: Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc, Gamay, Gewürztraminer and Cabernet Sauvignon.

In 1990, Cave Spring took another leap, purchasing the historic 1871 building that housed its cellars. Located in Jordan, one of Ontario's first Mennonite settlements, the tiny town boasted just one antique shop and a few artisans. There weren't even sidewalks. "In order to make this a destination, we needed [to offer] more," says Pennachetti. They opened the region's first winery restaurant, On the Twenty, in 1993 (named after Twenty Mile Creek, which it overlooks), and new chef Michael Olson quickly put it on the culinary map.

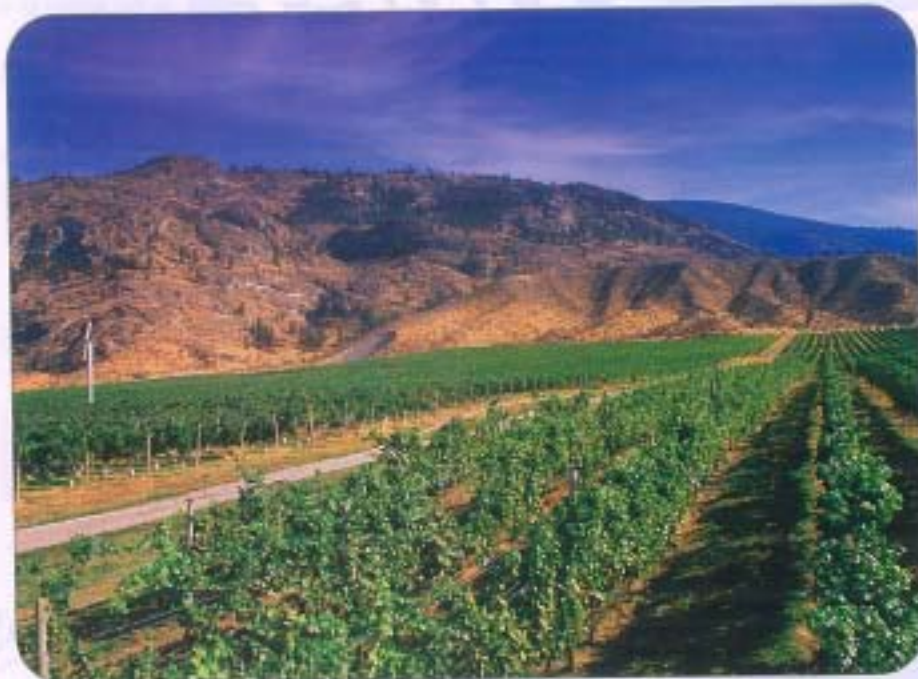
"We were pinching ourselves the first year or two,"

Pennachetti says. "Was this sustainable? Was there enough in the area to do?" The restaurant turned out to be the tipping point for growth, attracting enough people to keep an inn out of the black. Cave Spring opened Inn on the Twenty (run by Len's wife Helen Young) a few years later, cautiously expanding over the years from its nine rooms to the current 28. "It became a more sophisticated hospitality offering," says Young-Pennachetti.

The rooms are luxurious and large, some with private gardens. Its spa offers vinotherapy treatments, as well as the more standard massage and beauty treatments. A 75-minute, wine-country wrap, which features wine and grape seed-based products, is \$118. As part of their accommodation package (prices start at \$219 up to \$389), guests enjoy an enhanced continental breakfast with a chef's choice hot dish, such as eggs Benedict across the road at Inn on the Twenty. Most recently, the family bought and renovated the 1842 Jordan House, reputed to be the oldest roadhouse in Canada. The 14-room inn and tavern offers stylish accommodation at a modest price, starting at \$99 to a maximum of \$219 for an executive room with breakfast.

Today, the restaurant is under the competent hands of chef Kevin Mantaci. Chardonnay-poached Alaskan black cod (\$15 appetizer), Abate Farm young hen on sweet pea purée (\$29), Lake Erie pickerel (\$33) and trio of Ontario lamb (\$41) are some of the menu items. The space below the winery, used by the former owner to store massive piles of books, has become an area for private dining and tastings. The synergy of winery, inns, spa and restaurants created the "destination" the Pennachettis were after. Jordan now has the power to draw not only individual tourists but also corporate groups, weddings and the like.

"Cave Spring controls more than 70 hectares of vineyards on two coveted sites along the Niagara Escarpment known as the Beamsville Bench and the Twenty Mile Bench"



PLANET OF THE GRAPES: Nk'Mip winery in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley is home to incredible vistas, delicious food, great-tasting wine, and luxurious accommodations.

A NATION UNDER TERROIR

Nk'Mip is the first Aboriginal owned and operated winery in North America. In 1968, flush with land but not money, the Osoyoos band planted the southern Okanagan's first grapevines, clearing the land, removing rocks and planting vines by hand. Eventually, they had planted one of the largest vineyards in B.C. For a long time they sold grapes to other wineries, but in 2002, they partnered with Vincor, opening Nk'Mip. (The long-term plan is for the band to buy back the 49 per cent of the winery that Vincor owns.)

Much of the success of the 435-member Osoyoos band can be attributed to the dynamic leadership of their Chief Clarence Louie. Along with 20 years of motivating his people toward self-reliance, he's put his band's assets to work by forming partnerships with outside experts. Today, Nk'Mip Cellars anchors a spectacular site with the four-star Spirit Ridge Resort and Spa, Sonora Dunes Golf Course and the new desert cultural interpretative centre.

"A lot of individual partners are working together for a seamless experience," says Donna Falgaux, hospitality manager at Nk'Mip Cellars. "Visitors can eat at Nk'Mip Cellars one night and at Passatempo [at Spirit Ridge] another night." The accommodations may be operated by another company (Bellstar Resorts), but Falgaux says there's great harmony between the different companies. "With 94 villas and suites next door, we're almost assured the people there are going to visit the winery and purchase wine." She calls it a phenomenal success story, and it's easy to see why. Under winemaker Randy Picton the wines, from Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Merlot varieties, have seen great success.

Everything fits together with a magical result. Tourists can start the morning exploring the network of interpretive trails that run through 50 acres of the Great Basin Desert, the recon-

structed traditional Aboriginal village, and the cultural exhibits of the Okanagan Nation at the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre. (There are 11 different Aboriginal language families, or bands, in B.C.) When they're hungry and thirsty they can walk over to the cellars for a wine tasting and lunch on the terrace under a cooling mist. Nk'Mip's smoked meat platter (\$20) features cured, dried and smoked wild game meats and pâté. A large platter for two (\$45) has crab claws, organic wild caribou sausage, wild B.C. Coho salmon, wild rice, grilled bannock and seasonal vegetables. Single dishes include roasted quail (\$22) and pumpkin, and almond-crusted lamb rack (\$32). In the afternoon, guests can cross the parking lot and tee up for a game on a desert links-style golf course surrounded by sage, rabbit and antelope bushes (and yes, rattlesnakes). And if their muscles are sore they can go for a "golfer's rescue" massage and pedicure.

Evening can be spent at Spirit Ridge (daily rates for a one bedroom suite start at around \$200) overlooking Lake Osoyoos, enjoying chef Brad Lazarenko's inventive interpretation of local, fresh market cuisine, such as grilled bison steak with blue cheese cream and red wine chocolate sauce (\$28), lamb tenderloin on Moroccan spiced couscous (\$29), roast Maple Hills chicken breast with chorizo rice (\$28), and pecan-cheese koftas with tomato chutney (\$21). That's good eatin'.

THE WYSE OWL

The southern part of the Okanagan Valley in interior B.C. is home to one of Canada's most unique ecosystems. Sunny and dry with good irrigation, the soil is rich enough that many kinds of fruit grow in abundance. In the area between Oliver, near the north end of Osoyoos Lake, to the town of Osoyoos, close to the U.S. border, lie some of the most highly rated vineyards in Canada, especially for bold unctuous red wines. The town of Oliver has declared itself "Wine Capital of Canada" with justification.

Real estate developer Jim Wyse was new to winemaking when the first vineyards for Burrowing Owl Estate Winery were planted in Oliver, in 1993. Wyse hired experts, including Richard Cleave, a 30-year veteran of Okanagan viticulture, and renowned California winemaker Bill Dyer, who made the first wines in 1997, up until 2002. Today, Jim's son Steve, who was a protégé of Dyer, carries on the tradition of richly textured bold and delicious wines, from Pinot Noir, Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay.

Burrowing Owl has expanded slowly with each successful vintage. A viewing tower with an informative self-guided tour

display was erected in 2002, and the next year, a new wine shop, tasting bar and restaurant were added. Then in 2004, local architect Robert Mackenzie was called back to double the capacity of Burrowing Owl's underground wine caves, and in 2005, the final phase of construction began on a larger wine shop, executive offices and a 10-room guest house.

"We're remotely [located], so you have to offer more," says Chris Wyse (another son), who is general manager of the facilities. "We added the restaurant to give people a reason to come and spend time here." The inn was another natural complement to the wine business. "It's a nice way to give your customers a total experience instead of just the snap shot they get in a tasting room," he says.

While the Sonora Room restaurant, which overlooks 125 acres of vineyards, is the least profitable and highest-maintenance facet of Burrowing Owl's operation, the Wyse family is serious about making it great. A few good chefs have come and gone for various reasons. However, with this past April's hiring of well-known chef Bernard Casavant to lead the restaurant team, they're hoping to create a long-term winner. His presence alone has sparked a buzz of excitement. Formerly executive sous-chef at Four Seasons Vancouver, opening executive chef at Chateau Whistler and later owner/chef at Chez Bernard's in Whistler, he brings great skill to the job. His menu showcases local produce, such as West Coast pan-seared wild salmon fillet (\$32), Alberta grilled beef tenderloin (\$39), mountain berry "T" crusted duck breast (\$34), and Carmel's artisan goat cheese plate (\$20).

Jim's detail-orientated wife Midge has helped elevate the inn to near perfection. The rooms are luxurious with reading nooks, private balconies overlooking the vineyards, flat-screen TVs, and every modern convenience. The bathrooms are especially spacious with soaker tubs and separate rainspout showers. Guests can also enjoy a 25-metre pool surrounded by a large patio, a lounge, a breakfast room and four-season hot tub. Rates start at \$175 a night, rising to \$295 at peak season.

"Constructing something like this takes a toll on you," says Chris Wyse. The family can now sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labour, and so they should — Burrowing Owl wines continue to garner awards and the inn and restaurant are beloved.

Remarkably, each of these distinct wineries have transformed sleepy towns into tremendous destinations for culinary tourists, and word is spreading quickly, through the grapevine, naturally. □

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