

wine country WEEKEND



SUMAC RIDGE'S BLACK SAGE VINEYARD

by Deana Lancaster

For about an hour, we've been see-sawing along the Okanagan Connector, the scenery growing increasingly arid, the deciduous greenery of the coast having given way long ago to dusty scrub, pines and cattle fencing. At last, we emerge onto Highway 97 at Drought Hill, above the stretch of sparkling blue that is Okanagan Lake.

Accompanied by a friend and fellow wine lover, I'm on a mission to tour B.C. wine country, to get a taste of what's happening here. We have just two days — nowhere near the time it would take to do justice to the Okanagan's 100 or so wineries. We could turn north, to Kelowna, and many of the region's best-known vintners, but on this trip it's the vineyards and wineries studding the hot slopes of the southern valley that we want to explore, so we turn right instead.

On the outskirts of Summerland is **Sumac Ridge Estate Winery**. Established in 1980 by Harry McWatters, it's the oldest estate winery in the Okanagan and offers a properly polished experience to visitors. Here, we're greeted by manager of hospitality relations Roger Gillespie, who treats us to a tutored tasting in the Founder's Tasting Room (\$10, reservations recommended). "You should always have some of this," he says, as he pours the easy-sipping Steller's Jay Brut. Sumac is the largest producer of bubbles in the valley, and focuses much of its attention on sparkling wines, as well as on traditional Bordeaux blends and the varieties that comprise them. In fact, the winery's 2003 White Meritage was named

a favourite Canadian wine by renowned wine writer Jancis Robinson, and others, like the 2004 Cabernet Franc from Black Sage Vineyard, are cult favourites. The only downside is that Sumac Ridge is running out of wines as fast as it can make them... still, your best chance of scoring the bottles you want (or at least a taste of them) is right here at the winery.

Straight from our tasting we hit the patio at the Cellar Door Bistro for dinner. Executive chef Neil Schroeter creates a rotating menu of locally sourced dishes to pair with Sumac's wines, and the cheese selection — including several from local producers — is a sure thing. This fall the bistro will also open its Harvest Patio overlooking the crush pad, so diners can watch all the action as the grapes are brought in and crushed. www.sumacridge.com

At the end of Okanagan Falls' steep and narrow Green Lake Road is **See Ya Later Ranch**, formerly known as Hawthorne Mountain Vineyards. The winery was recently renamed to better reflect its quirky history. In 1918, decorated veteran Major Hugh Fraser brought his English war bride to the remote property he'd fallen in love with... but she was not as smitten. A short time after she arrived, she bolted, leaving him a note in a frying pan that read: "See ya later." Winery staff say that although the major lived in the stone farmhouse alone and never remarried, he raised championship collies for companionship. "He loved those dogs so much," explains guest services manager Sharleen Lauzon, "that whenever one died he'd get the minister up from town and have an elaborate funeral, and give each dog a headstone." The tiny graveyard remains, punctuated with 12 worn granite blocks identifying the canines that lie beneath, among them Ping, Major and Jimmy My Pal. Dog-lovers ourselves, this canine-friendly winery (which even offers a "Barking Lot" for parking your pooches while tasting or eating lunch on the deck) is an early favourite for us. And the wine is tasty too. Check out the deliciously fresh 2006 Riesling, the elegant 2005 Chardonnay and the off-dry 2006 Gewurztraminer. www.sylranch.com

Although the scenery at **Jackson-Triggs Okanagan Estate** is not as pretty as at our first two stops (since it's a large warehouse) the new Tasting Gallery is worth checking out, especially if you're serious about trying good wines. The Okanagan's largest winemaker, Jackson-Triggs has been piling up the awards, including the title of Winery of the Year at the 2006 Canadian Wine Awards. Settle in at the chic tasting bar to sample the winery's offerings, and don't miss the new limited edition SunRock wines — they can be hard to find outside of the winery. www.jacksontriggswinery.com

South of Oliver we pull in at **Inniskillin Okanagan Winery** and take a walk up to the scenic Dark Horse Vineyard for a look around. Afterward, in the blessed cool of the winery, we sample the Discovery Series wines by Hungarian-born winemaker Sandor Mayor. He's been experimenting with grape varieties new to the southern Okanagan, and judging from our tasting is finding success with varieties like Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Zinfandel and Malbec. www.inniskillin.com

We've now arrived in Canada's only "pocket desert." Lying in the rainshadow of the Cascade Mountains, this stark, silvery scrubland is actually a tiny finger of the Sonoran Desert which stretches from Mexico and crosses the border at Osoyoos. Getting less than four inches of rainfall a year and the highest temperatures in Canada, this desert climate is perfect for growing ripe, juicy grapes. Not only does **Burrowing Owl Estate Winery** make the most of these growing conditions for wines with concentrated flavours, but the stunning site is also home to the Sonora Room restaurant, the new ➔



uncork the fun

Fall is a joyous season in the Okanagan. Not only is it time to pick the fruits of its labour, but it's also when the industry celebrates at the annual Okanagan Fall Wine Festival. In fact, this 10-day fête is the only one in North America to take place during the grape harvest, and the Southern Valley isn't excluded. Here are just a few southern highlights from the more than 165 events taking place during the upcoming fest. More details and ticket information can be found at www.thewinefestivals.com.

Wine Dinners at Sumac Ridge From seafood with chardonnay to Big Bold Reds, Sumac Ridge Estate Winery plays host to a range of dinners throughout the festival.

Sept. 28 – Oct. 5, 6:30 p.m.
Sumac Ridge Estate Winery, Summerland

The Vertical Difference Be one of a lucky few to find out why Jackson-Triggs Vintners is one of the most awarded winemakers in the valley. These events will showcase a vertical tasting of past and present vintages of carefully selected wines from the Grand Reserve library collection. Learn about the special micro-climate indigenous to the South Okanagan.

Sept. 28 & 29, 7 p.m.
Jackson-Triggs Vintners, Oliver

Dog Days of Summer See Ya Later Ranch hosts its fifth annual party and fundraiser for the B.C. SPCA. The canine-friendly winery invites people and their pooches to an afternoon of tasting newly released vintages and snacking on dogs... hot dogs, of course!

Sept. 29, Noon – 6 p.m.
See Ya Later Ranch, Okanagan Falls

Barreled Treasure Festival Get a first taste of Nk'Mip Cellars' new Qwam Qwmt (Q2) Reserve wines right from the barrel, paired with a five-course "festival" of culinary delights.

Sept. 29, 6 p.m. – 10 p.m.
Nk'Mip Cellars, Osoyoos

Blasted Church's Midnight Service To press time there were still tickets available for this late-night, gospel-singing party held every year at Blasted Church Vineyards after the festival's Grand Tasting in Penticton. Sway to the heavenly music, nosh on food from Memphis Blues Barbecue House and sip from the winery's latest releases.

Oct. 5 & 6, 9 p.m. – 1 a.m.
Blasted Church Vineyards, Okanagan Falls



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10-room guesthouse and a winery building that offers a self-guided tour to the top of the bell tower with spectacular views across Black Sage Road to the wineries of The Golden Mile. www.bovwine.ca

Although we have more must-do wineries on our list, we find our bliss at **Nk'Mip Cellars**. North America's first aboriginal-owned winery is endowed with unbeatable views down leafy rows of grapevines straight to Osoyoos Lake, and the New Mexican-styled architecture fits right in with its desert surroundings. The upper tier of wines, called the Qwam Qwmt Series (or Q2 by staff at the winery) are an intense bunch, full of delicious, ripe flavours. It's at Nk'Mip too that we enjoy our favourite meal of the trip. The winery kitchen serves lunch, dinner and snacks on its patio (lightly misted to help control the temperature), all influenced by traditional aboriginal recipes and made with fresh local ingredients. After a starter of grilled bannock served with caramelized onions, we eat our fill of the Nk'Mip Platter for Two, beautifully arranged with crab claws, Wild Mushroom Strudel, guinea fowl sausage, skewers of grilled bison, scallops wrapped in wild boar bacon, prawn kebabs and smoked salmon, all served with wild rice and a heap of fresh veggies. To beat the heat we sip cool glasses of the Winemakers Series Riesling and soak in the incredible views. A wine country weekend doesn't get better than this, and sated by luscious food (and a lot of wine) we decide to finish our trip on this high note. www.nkmipcellers.com



RIESLING ON THE TERRACE AT NK'MIP CELLARS

When you go: As members of the same Vincor family, Sumac Ridge, See Ya Later Ranch, Inniskillin and Nk'Mip have teamed up for the Great Estates Tour. Purchase a Wine Country Journal at any of the wine shops, and find maps, information, guidance and coupons, as well as pages for recording your own thoughts and tasting notes. At each stop, get a stamp, and when it's completed, enter to win another trip back to wine country.

Where to stay: We based our Southern Valley sojourns from the lovely Spirit Ridge Resort & Spa. Attached to Nk'Mip Cellars, this four-star property is a destination in itself. Although we could have used the stocked kitchen in our suite, we breakfasted instead on tasty plates at the Passatempo restaurant. The Sonora Desert Spa features indigenous-inspired treatments, and the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre is the source for info about the desert and its inhabitants, interpretive hikes and aboriginal programs. Of course, if all that wine tasting and touring is too much for you, the poolside loungers make for a comfy retreat. www.spiritridge.ca ■

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