

Okanagan dreaming

BY VALERIE BERENYI, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 4, 2012



Willi Franz, co-owner and executive chef of Grapevine Restaurant at Gray Monk Estate Winery south of Vernon, B.C., dubs the distinctive cuisine that's taken root alongside the region's mushrooming wineries 'wine country cooking.'

B.C.'s Okanagan Valley has always been known for its bounty: the cherries, peaches and apples that thrive in the irrigated, fertile soil; the more than 65 grape varieties that ripen in the hot summer sun before being turned into award-winning wines; the astonishing cornucopia of vegetables, meats and cheeses found in local farmers' markets.

Those lucky enough to live in the valley eat well; many grow prolific gardens, canning, drying and freezing their own tomatoes, peppers and plums, or turning them into salsa and jam. There is so much food, residents almost take it for granted. Sometimes, it's literally falling on their heads. Ask a local with fruit or nut trees in their backyard, and they might beg you to come pick the stuff.

While home cooks have long turned out amazing dishes for appreciative guests, the idea of a formal Okanagan cuisine is relatively new.

Rhys Pender is a master of wine who trained as a chef. When he moved to the Okanagan 12 years ago, he says you could count the valley's good restaurants on one hand: "Now you'd need both hands and feet."

The burgeoning wine industry, going from 17 wineries in 1990 to nearly 200 in 2011, is "attracting high-calibre chefs who are embracing local products and produce," says Pender, a transplanted Australian who teaches, judges and writes about wine.

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Based on the local harvests and their ability to pair beautifully with the region's wines, the Okanagan's version of wine country cooking is simple, fresh and relatively free of garnishes and sauces.

"I've been in the valley now for 35 years. When I first came here, the tourism was family oriented. People came in the summer, they went to the beach and to (tourist attractions like) Flintstones Park," says Franz, who was named Canadian Chef of the Year in 2011 by the Canadian Culinary Federation, and 2010 Chef of the Year by the Okanagan Chefs Association.

While tourists flocked here for fruit by the boxful, few came for the valley's cuisine.

"You went to a nice hotel and they served the food of the day. There was no local wine," says Franz, who was born in Germany and started very young in the family business, a country inn and farm near Frankfurt that served its own version of wine country cuisine.

He brought fine European dining to Kelowna when he founded the Williams Inn in the late 1970s. By the early '80s, he carried two Okanagan wines on a wine list of 120 selections that were mostly French, Italian and German. The local wine selections grew gradually, as the area's vintages improved.

In the mid-'80s, Franz participated in the valley's first winemakers' dinner with vintners from Quails' Gate, Gray Monk, Cedar Creek Estate Winery and Gehringer Brothers' Estate Winery. "They actually rolled in barrels and we did a barrel tasting. It was very new then. That's when we really got into it," he recalls.

"At every wine festival we ran up to six events with different wineries. We thought it was good marketing, good business and we liked doing it. We had the winemakers come in to talk about their wines; we paired the food. That's how I really connected more with the wineries."

He loved the challenge of doing something new and different beyond changing a restaurant's menu once or twice a year. "Anyone who's passionate about food doesn't want to do the same thing all the time. It gets boring."

It wasn't until Mission Hill Family Estate winery in Westbank, B.C., claimed the title of Best Chardonnay Worldwide in 1994 at a competition in London that the valley's wine industry and the cuisine growing up alongside it really gained confidence, Franz says.

"That put us in the big leagues."

Today, tourism goes year round, the Okanagan Wine Festivals run four times a year and international foodies make pilgrimages to the valley's restaurants.

Flintstones Bedrock City is long gone.

Darin Paterson, the chef-owner of Bogner's of Penticton, arrived in the valley five years ago. An Edmontonian who did his Red Seal training through NAIT, he'd lived for a few years in Sweden before returning home. When he couldn't get the permits for the kind of patio-based, open-air resto he wanted to open in his home town, he decided to look in Vancouver. On the way there, he and his wife drove through Penticton and discovered that Bogner's, begun in 1977, was for sale.

"We never made it to Vancouver," says the 36-year-old chef.

His restaurant serves "fine European farm-to-table cuisine," using the crops that surround him.

"Great ingredients make it easy," he says of cooking in the Okanagan.

Paterson has leased one hectare in Naramata to grow produce for his restaurant. In spring, his kitchen staff help on the farm, which has apple, pear and plum trees. Tomato plants yielded 54 kilograms of fruit a day in peak season; this past fall, Paterson and his team harvested more than 1,088 kilograms of potatoes.

Grass-fed, organic lamb, chicken and eggs come from nearby Cawston.

Last fall, when the Herald visited during the Fall Okanagan Wine Festival, Paterson was planning his winter menu, freezing produce and sous-vide-cooked meat and poultry.

He's formed a good relationship with Noble Ridge Vineyard & Winery in Oliver, and does the winery's annual harvest dinner during the fall wine festival. In October, the menu featured dishes such as organic fire-roasted Moroccan tomato soup, grilled marinated chicken and lamb skewers served on couscous with zucchini relish and grilled vegetable salsa and organic plum cake. Chef Franz thinks of his "foodshed" as including fish from the B.C. coast, and beef and pork from Alberta. In season, he buys 90 per cent of his produce locally, most of it from a farmer "up the road."

"I want to know who grows the food I use. We never question the price. We want good quality and we are willing to pay for it."

He's also committed to growing young culinary talent and getting junior chefs excited about the bounty that surrounds them. "We have to instill that in them."

The valley is home to one of the fastest growing and active chapters of the Canadian Culinary Federation, he says, adding that Okanagan College is playing a vital role in developing wine country cuisine with its culinary arts program and "good, passionate instructors."

"A lot of juniors went to Calgary or Vancouver for school. Now they're staying here. It's really exciting."

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