

Region abuzz with agri-tourism fun; Sample mead or some cider on next visit to Okanagan

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Midway through a hike in Kalamalka Lake Provincial Park, my husband and I realize we have 30 minutes to hoof it back to the car and then drive to Vernon to sample mead at Planet Bee honey farm. It seems an impossible task.

We're standing at Turtles Head Point, a rocky promontory atop the end of a peninsula that juts into the aquamarine water of Kalamalka Lake.

To the south stretches the lake, framed by mountains covered in pine trees and poplars blazing their fall colours. To the north lies the district of Coldstream, with Vernon beyond but out of sight behind the bald mass of Middleton Mountain.

We take a final look around, and then begin the return walk, choosing the lower trail past Jade Bay, where turquoise water laps the leaf-strewn shore.

We reach our rental car 15 minutes later and arrive for honey wine right on time. No wonder people love Vernon, I think. You can hike and taste honey in the same day, or, come winter, ski and sip. That's a lifestyle I could get used to.

We've come to Vernon for a weekend getaway that coincides with the Fall Okanagan Wine Festival.

We expect wine and outdoor adventure -the region is known for its hiking and mountain biking trails. We soon discover, however, that in Vernon, there are more interesting drinks to sip after exertion than wine.

Like mead. Ed Nowek, who greets us at Planet Bee, has been making honey for more than a decade. He decided to branch into honey wine to give visitors a total Okanagan experience: it's wine tourism meets agri-tourism. The mead we try is quite dry -refreshing after our hike -but Nowek says his "mead master" is playing around with batches. By year's end he plans to offer five or six varieties, many of them sweeter.

"I like this community," says Nowek, who started Planet Bee in Armstrong, 12 years ago and moved his business to Vernon in 2003. "It's a nice agri-tourism area."

Indeed, Vernon is big on agri-tourism. "The whole valley sees agri-tourism as the holy grail," says Darcel Markgraf, an Okanagan apple grower. "Everyone is trying to find the goose that's laying the golden egg."

Since it's hard to make a living by just selling apples, and orchard owners don't want to lose their livelihood and lifestyle, they must diversify their offerings.

Such is the case with Planet Bee's neighbour, Davison Orchards. The busy operation grows 24 varieties of apples and makes a pure apple cider that tastes like liquid apple crisp -one reason it's crawling with families on this sunny day.

The other reason? The orchard has a petting zoo and a kids' play area, so it's a no-brainer stop for visitors with tots in tow.

In downtown Vernon, Okanagan Spirits is creating its own brand of agritourism by making spirits and liqueurs from orchard fruit that would otherwise be thrown out -cherries or pears that

fell to the ground before they could be harvested, for example. "It gives farmers another avenue for selling their products," says manager Rodney Goodchild.

Distilled apples, pears, plums, cherries and other berries make some delicious spirits and liqueurs. In fact, Okanagan Spirits is the only distillery in North America recognized as a master class distillery.

"We're not in the business of making alcohol," says Goodchild. "We want to capture the aroma that's in fruit and bring it to alcohol."

You could have fooled me. After a glass of mead and a taste each of cherry, raspberry and blackcurrant liqueur, chased with a wee tot of Taboo absinthe, I'm beginning to see what Vernon's buzz is all about. I'm also beginning to understand why Vernon was ranked the most entrepreneurial city in B.C. in 2009 by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

"We are working hard to create a community where people, and businesses, want to be," says Kevin Poole, Vernon's economic development officer.

I definitely want to be here, and I wouldn't mind venturing next door, to the Okanagan Spring Brewery, either, but it will have to wait for another visit -we're off to a wine tasting later.

We had planned another hike for Sunday morning, but after a late sleep we bail in favour of strong coffee and a tasty egg panini at Bean to Cup, followed by a 25-minute drive to Silver Star Mountain Resort.

It strikes me that's the downside to agri-tourism -visitors risk eating and drinking so much, it might interfere with their plans for outdoor adventure.

IF YOU GO

Where to stay: Durali Villa is a vacation home meets upscale hostel; meaning, you can take over the entire property for a family reunion or wedding, or you can just rent a room and make use of the shared gourmet kitchen, media room, swimming pool and hot tub. Owner Gurjit Jhajj spent over two years renovating the 12,000-square-foot home, which boasts finishes like leather tile floors and fibre optic ceilings in some of the rooms.

Go to duralivilla.com or call 250-549-4949. Go to tourismvernon.com for a complete list of options.

WHERE TO SIP:

- Planet Bee (planetbee.com)

just finished installing a tasting bar where you can sample Okanagan Delight or Blueberry Bliss mead.

- Okanagan Spirits (okanaganspirits.com) offers free tours and tastings between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

- Okanagan Springs Brewery

(okspring.com) sells six varieties of craft beer. The brewery is not currently offering tours, but that may change come summer.

Events: The Spring Okanagan Wine Festival runs April 29 to May 8, with tastings and dinners taking place in Kelowna and surrounding communities. The Summer Okanagan Wine Festival takes place at Silver Star Mountain Resort July 8-16.

Details are at thewinefestivals.com.