

Visitors walk the 1.5km boardwalk at the Osoyoos Desert Centre on a rare rainy day.



Grape escape among the vines

Winemaking is no laughing matter in the southernmost region of British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, writes **SUZANNE MORPHET**

A cool breeze is blowing off Canada's warmest lake. In July and August, the water in Osoyoos Lake, British Columbia, reaches a balmy 24C, and has drawn generations of families to the small resort town of Osoyoos. But on this mid-September morning, a single paddleboarder has the lake to himself. The kids are back in school, the weather

has turned and a new kind of visitor has arrived: the wine enthusiast.

Osoyoos is at the southern end of the Okanagan region, a 250km-long glacier-carved valley that is synonymous with wine. Yet, more than 50 per cent of all wine grapes in BC are grown in the 33km stretch between Osoyoos and a bluff just north of Oliver, the "wine capital of Canada".

That's remarkable given this hot, inhospitable place is a "pocket" desert, riddled with rattlesnakes and scorpions. I've come to meet a few of the equally remarkable people behind these grapes and, of course, to taste some of their award-winning wine.

We drive first to Nk'Mip (ink-a-meep) Cellars, the first Indigenous-owned winery in North America. Most of its grapes are grown at Inkameep Vineyards, on land owned by the Osoyoos Indian Band on the Black Sage Bench.

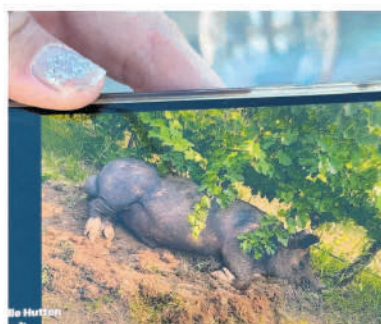
Nk'Mip Cellars has won major awards since opening in 2002, including being named Canadian winery of the year in 2016/17 by the InterVin International Wine Awards.

But growing grapes has been a monumental task. During the heat dome of 2021, the thermometer soared to 54.5C in the Inkameep vineyards. "So that year we didn't get any pinot noir," estate manager Troy Ravndahl recalls. "It literally just dropped its fruit. It said, 'I'm done. See you next year.'"

Then, in 2024, the temperature in January went from 11C to a frigid -30C in three days, killing vines throughout BC. And this



Above, sculptures at Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre. Below, Danielle Hutton, winemaker at Fairview Cellars, shows a photo of a pig passed out in her vineyard after feasting on grapes.



past August, smoke from a nearby wildfire blanketed the region for two weeks.

Yet, in Nk'Mip's tasting room, we savour the flavours of half a dozen wines, including the taste of

sun-ripened cherries from a 2022 bottle of pinot noir. Those vines came back, winning silver and bronze at various competitions.



Suzanne Morphet gets a close look at the grapes at Fairview Cellars' vineyard. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Above, the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre is owned and operated by the Osoyoos Indian Band and offers visitors insight into the culture of the local Syilx (Okanagan) people. Below, inside the Italian-style tasting room at Hester Creek Estate Winery.



Nk'Mip Cellars estate manager Troy Ravndahl pours wine at a tasting. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

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On the drive to Hester Creek Estate Winery, we pass row upon row of trellised vines, heavy with purple fruit. Orchards abound and markets sell everything from apples to zucchini.

Hester Creek is on the Golden Mile Bench, 6km across the valley from Inkameep Vineyards. It was originally planted in 1968, a time when most growers favoured hardy hybrids, but not Joe Busnardo. An Italian immigrant, he sneaked cuttings from classic European grapes — pinot blanc, trebbiano, cabernet franc and more — into his suitcase and planted them on this sun-drenched slope, where they thrived.

Inside the winery, we taste the luscious legacy of those old vines

and newer ones, too, including viognier, the current winemaker's favourite. "It has a weight to it," Mark Hopley explains. "It also has a viscosity. It's a little slippery, but it is incredibly fragrant on the nose."

Apricots, peaches, pears, plums — an entire season of fruit blossoms from my glass. "I'm surprised we have any left," jokes Suzanne Burns, tasting room ambassador, "because we would be walking through the back and he (Mark) goes, 'Sue, have you tried the viognier today?'"

That sounds like fun, so we follow Mark back into the fermentation room, the air redolent of ripe fruit and buzzing with fruit flies. Turning the tap on a shiny steel tank, he pours us each half a glass of a cloudy liquid.

I whoop with delight. "You see?" he chuckles.

I'm beginning to sense that humour is how people in this tough business cope with not knowing what's around the next corner. That, and a sunny outlook. "I think it's going to be a great year," Mark smiles.

At Fairview Cellars we meet winemaker Danielle Hutton, who looks impossibly relaxed given it's harvest and this year's Wine Capital Weekend is just a few days away. Hutton is chair of the organising committee and has helped plan a three-day party for thousands of people with live entertainment, a grape-stomping competition, games and other events.

"Harvest can be all-consuming," she admits. Which is maybe why she seems happy to join us on her deck as we sip a selection of her full-bodied reds (she focuses on Bordeaux varieties), whine a little — "we're farmers . . . what is happening in the vineyard is out of our control

fact file

■ Watermark Beach Resort is steps from Osoyoos Lake in the town of Osoyoos, BC, and offers apartment-style suites (studio, one, two or three bedrooms) and two-bedroom townhouses. Stay and Sip packages give adult guests a Tasting Passport valued at \$C200 (\$203) for tastings at a variety of local wineries, a craft brewery and distillery. watermarkbeachresort.com

■ Between tastings, it's worth visiting the Osoyoos Desert Centre, a 27ha nature interpretive facility with guided tours. Open May through early October. visitoliver.com

■ The Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre offers indoor and outdoor experiences to give visitors insight into the living culture of the first Okanagan people. nkmipdesert.com

■ The closest airport to Osoyoos is in Penticton, BC. Pacific Coastal flies there daily from Vancouver. pacificcoastal.com



Fairview Cellars gives tasters a glass stamped with their logo and the year.

discover the wine list. It's almost as long as the water slide and hyper-local. More than 100 wines, all but one from wineries within a half-hour drive.

Watermark general manager David McBean, it turns out, is a wine nerd and every year puts together a new list with the help of staff. "We've got bottles you can't find anywhere else," he tells me as humbly as humanly possible.

"Such as?" I ask. "Nighthawk cabernet franc 2019," he says, with impressive insider knowledge. "They lost a lot of vines. They don't have any cab franc right now of any vintage of any kind . . . Their own cellar doesn't have that wine, so they have to come here to drink it."

Woe is me. This is my last night here, but I'm wined out. I'm already sipping — you guessed it — a kid-friendly mocktail!

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Watermark Beach Resort, Destination Osoyoos, Oliver Osoyoos Wine Country and the wineries mentioned. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



A guide at the Osoyoos Desert Centre shows visitors the rattle from a dead rattlesnake.