

TRAVEL

Libations aplenty are laid out in anticipation for a steady flux of Half Corked Marathon runners in Osoyoos.

Canada 150 **Braving B.C.'s run for the rosés...**

... and whites and reds as a thousand wacky participants endure the desert heat of Okanagan Valley's Half Corked Marathon



Left, the Half Corked Marathon runs through spectacular Oliver Osoyoos wine country. Right, taking a sip at Desert Hills Winery.

LIZ BEDDALL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

OSOYOOS, B.C.—The faintest breeze washes over row upon row of slim vines, as the morning light of spring in the southern Okanagan Valley dances upon the thousands of young grapes on their branches. In the distance, small caps of snow on the surrounding mountain range imply a refreshing respite from the desert heat.

Amid the fertile greenery of the vineyards, there is a quiet elegance that only premier wine country can boast. A curious bee brushes against a nearby leaf, a singular cloud floats overhead against the open sky, and a woman dressed in hot pants accessorized with a rainbow tutu and fairy wings runs by, followed by a six-foot human banana.

"I couldn't imagine running or walking all those kilometres in 25-degree weather in stilettos, or dressed as an alligator, or a pack of Energizer bunnies," says Gina Harfman, owner of Oliver Twist Winery. "These people are here to have fun and it shows."

Today [Oliver Twist Estate Winery] along with 13 other member wineries of the Oliver Osoyoos wine region, are lending their venues as libation stations for the ninth annual [Half Corked Marathon]. The 1000-runner-strong, 18-kilometre fun run weaves through the very fields that produce more than 60 per cent of all the grapes grown by British Columbia's wine industry.

Along the area's acclaimed Golden Mile Bench with its dusty roads, expansive vineyards and a stretch of narrow lake that connects the Osoyoos and Oliver communities, participating wineries have set out hundreds of tasting glasses to be sipped or gulped by eager runners, and walkers, along their way. Today, Denise Stephenson, who made a six-hour drive to the event with her daughter, has chosen Silver Sage Winery as a favourite.

WINE continued on T4

For runners, 'the wine just keeps on flowing'

WINE from T1

"They do a bang up job — music is always playing and so much food," she says. "And the wine just keeps on flowing."

Stephenson and her daughter have chosen to dress up as trolls, donning red capri tights, headbands glued with troll-hair fabric and matching shirts that bear faux-Nike emblems. Each top reads, "Just Drink It."

"They're all great wineries," Stephenson says. "There are always so many memorable moments at this event. Everyone is in such a good mood and the costumes... just the whole day is great."

Inspired by the similarly quirky Medoc Marathon in Bordeaux, France, the Half Corked's agenda is seemingly to flip the huffy image often associated with the wine industry on its head, thereby drawing a new generation of aficionados to the vine. And the method, as of now, seems to be working.

While the event at its conception sold no more than 250 tickets in total, the Half Corked's current annual average of 4,000 applicants have to be pared down via lottery, with local wineries hosting a plethora of spirited functions that fill the entire weekend. Most notable of those is the Primavera Dinner, a ruckus and delicious community carb-load the night before the race.

"Students, professionals, young, middle-aged, seniors, locals and visitors from across North America and overseas are all involved," says Michael Bartier, owner of [Bartier Bros] winery.

"I think what I see them having in common is that they're engaged in their outlook. These are people who are not caught up in the pretense that can exist around wine, but doesn't here."

Standing as one of many cases in point, the [Church & State Wines] station — stop number four on the course — comes complete with a carnival theme. Runners who pause here find balloons, a spinning wheel draw, clownish characters and cold taster glasses of bubbly garnished with buttered popcorn skewers. Later along the route comes Proscé ice



LIZ BEDDALL PHOTOS

This is the ninth season of the Half Corked Marathon, which attracts more than 4,000 applicants annually.



A very colourful start to one of three morning heats on Half Corked race day. The event includes a live concert and pancake breakfast.



Soon after the start line participants are subjected to a panel of judges who rank their race day attire.

chips, sangria and outdoor showers for the overheated, and the Montakarn stop close to the finish line where a country band is playing over Thai-style barbecue offerings.

And of course, there's the wine. Reds, whites, rosés, sparkling varieties and ice wines overflow in the

region, and are all on offer today courtesy of the varied terroir of the Okanagan.

"Someone once asked me what the signature grape of the valley is. I couldn't answer him because I didn't know," says Gary Misson, owner of [Montakarn Estate Winery]. "Other

valleys have a signature grape. For example, Napa has its Cabs, Oregon has Pinot. However, the Okanagan Valley is long and narrow so a huge assortment of grapes can flourish and ripen here. Diversity — got to love it, hey?"

At the finish line of the Half Corked,

> WHEN YOU GO:

Get there: I flew Air Canada (aircanada.com) from Toronto to Vancouver, then boarded a connecting flight from Vancouver to Pentton.

Get around: For those looking for a unique and delightfully lazy way of traversing the Okanagan countryside, try hooking up with Heatstroke Cycle Tours (heatstrokecycle.com), which pairs wine tourists with easy-to-use motorized bicycles.

Stay: I stayed at the gorgeous Spirit Ridge at NK/MIP resort (spiritridge.ca), which features the first Indigenous-owned winery in North America.

Do the Half Corked Marathon:

Those looking to sign up for next year's 10th annual Half Corked Marathon (oliverosoyos.com/halfcorked) run can enter online. From there, a lottery determines the final 1000 contestants.

Do your research: oliverosoyos.com, okanagan.com

there is live music, a picnic lunch and many bare feet in the grass.

The smell of spring blossoms permeates the air and the wine is still flowing abundantly. Race contestants — although the idea of competition at the Half Corked is virtually non-existent — have been spoiled up to this point. The event included a live concert and a pancake breakfast.

I hear a fatigued but smiling Superman mention that she's starting to feel three-quarters corked as she moves toward the tasting tents to inquire about purchasing a bottle.

"Fundamentally, the Half Corked has changed the economy here, which was one of the goals," says Nancy Robb, executive director of Oliver Osoyoos Winery Association. "And the authentic, modest vibe of the area is very important to us, that's what the marathon is all about."

Liz Beddall was hosted by Destination British Columbia, which did not review or approve this story.