



# At B.C. wineries, it's all in the family these days

LISA KADANE OLIVER, B.C.

**I**t was horrible and awesome at the same time!" my daughter gushed at the end of her first vineyard adventure race.

Dripping with muddy water and noticeably barefoot (her shoes came off in a bog), Avery, 12, had limped toward the finish line on the heels of several other tweens competing in the Freak'n Farmer obstacle race at Covert Farms, an organic farm and estate winery in Oliver, B.C.

She was one of 200 kids and 450 adults running in the annual event, put on with help from Hoodoo Adventures. Participants sprint down rows of grape vines, traverse monkey bars over mounds of manure, shovel compost, flip giant tractor tires and complete myriad tasks that farmer and winemaker Gene Covert calls "scaled-down versions of what a farmer would do." Afterward, children played on giant jumping pillows and danced to band music while parents recovered with wine tastings.

That so many families show up each year for this gruelling-but-exhilarating spectacle is a testament to how far Covert and his family have gone to make the vineyard and farm experience as approachable as possible. On regular business days,

Covert Farms leads family-friendly tours of the 265-hectare property in a vintage truck. The organic grower also lets visitors feed the herd of highland cows, pick fruits and vegetables straight from the tree or vine and encourages parents to relax with a glass of wine while their offspring hang out by the chicken coop or the llama enclosure.

"We think it's important for wineries to be inclusive of families," Covert says. "Wine tends to be a part of culture, food and community – sounds like families to me."

Indeed, it's all in the family at many Okanagan wineries these days, as more vineyards welcome kids and even dogs onto their sprawling grounds.

"Our visitors are families, whether it's parents with children, or grandparents with adult children, or aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews," says Jennifer Busmann, executive director of the Oliver Osoyoos Winery Association.

"The wineries haven't necessarily carved out experiences for children, but many seem to have special treats for kids, whether it's a custom home-made cookie or lollipop, or a sparkling cider they can drink. They're the next generation of wine drinkers, so you want them to have a good experience."

Parents just want to have a wine experience, period. Since they don't usually get a babysitter on a family holiday, it's nice when the dual worlds of munchkins and Merlot collide.

My husband and I used to leave the children behind when the vacation veered from playgrounds to pinot.



Children compete in the Freak'n Farmer obstacle race at Covert Farms, an organic farm and estate winery in Oliver, B.C. C.K. STENBERG

» We dropped them off with Grandma for trips to Sonoma, Calif., and Kelowna, B.C., when they were little, and we dumped them into the kids club at Spirit Ridge Resort in Osoyoos when they were medium-sized for our afternoon sipping Chardonnay and Syrah in the south Okanagan.

But now that they're big – at least, semi-independent enough to stay out of the tasting room when the winemaker is talking about his Viognier's tropical intensity – we bring them along.

At **Road 13** near Oliver, they pick grapes from the vines and walk our dog on the lawn while we sample the aforementioned Viognier and a commanding cabernet sauvignon with owner Mick Luckhurst and his son Joe.

Down the road at **vinAmité** Cellars, children crowd around the tasting bar and vie for a seat at the colouring table. "It's giving mum and dad a tiny break so they can enjoy the wine experience," vinAmité's Catherine Coulombe says.

"A juice box goes a long way."

At Blind Tiger Vineyards in Lake Country, about a two-hour drive north of Oliver, Avery chases and holds silkie chickens (used by the winery to eat insects that might otherwise nibble on the grapes) as we swirl and sip at the tasting bar and, later, guzzle Gewurztraminer slush cocktails at a picnic table with views of lush vines and the valley below.

And a bit farther north, at Planet Bee Honey Farm in Vernon, we savour the nectar of the gods while our son watches bees swarm the glass-encased indoor hive and his sister tastes heaping samples of honey from disposable toothpicks.

For us, family wine touring has become a real – and even enjoyable – possibility. We'll be back to **Covert Farms** next fall to taste and run at the Freak'n Farmer race, and I'm sure our next jaunt down the valley will bring us to more wineries that welcome grape lovers, big and small.

### THREE MORE TO TRY IN OLIVER AND OSOYOOS

#### Hidden Chapel

Kids can play with winery mascots Max, a German shepherd, and D.O.G., a cuddly golden retriever. The winery's pretty lawn leads to a tiny sequestered chapel that children also love to explore.

#### Gehringer Brothers Estate Winery

Future oenophiles get to eat ripe wine grapes so they can taste the sweet pinot gris or merlot fruit that will eventually fill their parents' glasses.

#### Nk'Mip Cellars

The first Indigenous-owned winery in North America offers a family-friendly winery tour and features pathways that meander through the vineyard down to the beach at Osoyoos Lake.

Lisa Kadane



The writer's daughter, Avery, holds silkie chickens at Blind Tiger Vineyards in Lake Country. The chickens are used by the winery to eat insects that might otherwise nibble on the grapes. LISA KADANE