

We are pioneering a new industry. We are taking chances and forging through new territory, trying unique grape variants that people thought previously impossible.
Amy Richards, viticulturist at Phantom Creek Estates



FROM MUSE TO MAKERS

Meet the women changing Osoyoos wine country



Perched on the Golden Mile Bench, each grape at Culmina Family Estate Winery is hand-harvested.

TASLIM BURKOWICZ

Choppy lake waters hit the shore against dense shrub land as we drove into wine country. As the road wound through the valley, we were bordered by mountains covered in sage brush. Beaten down by the sun, the distant dusty yellow slopes were accented with antelope brush and cacti. I thought of the Sonoran Desert.

We passed dilapidated barnyards, and an abandoned railway. A murmuration of starlings changed directions like schools of startled fish overhead. Wild horses and rattlesnakes are at home here. I thought of the Wild West.

Soon, lush orchards and grape vines blurred by, for miles on end. I thought of Tuscany.

This is Osoyoos, less than an hour flight away from Vancouver. I was there on a wine tour of wineries producing wines made by women.

"We've gotten more creative than the Europeans with experimenting," said Maryke Vandermaarel, estate manager of Culmina Family Estate Winery, holding up a glass of 2017 Hypothesis that was the colour of crushed Russian amethyst.

The contrast of long, sun-baked days and chilly, refreshing night breezes make for a surprising range of wines, from golden to red velvet and everything in between. The vineyard at Culmina was a brilliant emerald with ripening fruit when I visited in the fall; part of the patchwork mosaic blanketing the countryside.

"We are starting from ground zero and are coming up with new blends. Europe has remained old-world, but we are breaking traditions," said Vandermaarel, who left her position as the wine director for Barefoot Bistro in Whistler to start something new in Osoyoos.

Perched on the Golden Mile Bench, each grape at Culmina is hand-harvested, certified organic, and grown on the site, making wines suitable for myriad food pairings and all occasions.

Women are not only making more distinct wines in Osoyoos, they are breaking down the science of farming. At Phantom

IF YOU GO:

Stay at the Watermark Beach Resort, located on the stunning shores of Osoyoos Lake. The Watermark offers condo-style rooms with kitchenettes. Amenities include a Jacuzzi, steam room, spa, and a gym. Night times for me were reserved for the steam room and Jacuzzi after some serious wine trekking. But I knew that the next time I came here I wanted to bring my kids — for the waterside alone. If you like Mexican food, try Tacofriendo. Owner Jany Lopez, who once sold tortilla shells out of her truck, owns and operates this fantastic gem with trademark margaritas and homemade guacamole. A local favourite, the place was packed when we got there.

Creek Estates, grape varieties hailing from places as far as Portugal and Austria are being grown. The two awe-inspiring, seven-metre-tall angel sculptures marking the winery entrance are a sure sign that you are in for something divine.

"We are pioneering a new industry," said viticulturist Amy Richards at Phantom Creek Estates.

"We are taking chances and forging through new territory, trying unique grape variants that people thought previously impossible."

Richards did her bachelor's in Viticultural Science back in her hometown in Australia, and went on to manage grower profiles in Napa, but it is the red grapes of the Okanagan Valley that have called her to Osoyoos.

The alluvial fans in Osoyoos' unique topography help form benches of nutrient-rich soil conducive for grape growing. After sipping the fruit-forward wine which showcases the grape for what it is, we could appreciate the vast difference from retail wine mass produced in silos.

SEE OSOYOOS ON E2



"We've gotten more creative than the Europeans with experimenting," says Maryke Vandermaer, estate manager of Culmina Family Estate Winery. *JON ADRIAN*

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WINERIES CHALLENGE TRADITION

Inside Phantom Creek's restaurant, which featured endless, panoramic views of the Okanagan Valley, I indulged in French brioche topped with Saskatoon berry jam and creamy Jerusalem artichoke ice cream.

At family owned vinAmité Cellars, we learned what makes wine feminine, with floral-forward boutique wines that capture the essence of a dozen white roses in a glass. Located off the highway, vinAmité looks like an antiquated French cottage and has stunning views of a two-hectare vineyard.

Run by Wendy and Catherine Colombe, a French-Canadian mother-and-daughter duo, vinAmité does not shy away from featuring wines made for women by women.

"From novice to aficionado, there's a wine here for everyone," said Catherine.

The reserve Chardonnay, with notes of buttery peach and lemon meringue pie, was served to us complemented by a charcuterie board of savoury cheeses, wine jellies, pickles and berries, topped with a sprig of wildflower. Visitors can purchase this culinary delight for just \$15.

Women, it appears, have an additional gift allotted to them in the art of winemaking: a more complex taste palette.

Viticultivist Val Tait of Gold Hill Winery, who has a degree in molecular biology and plant biochemistry, has used this to help her develop the skill of detecting a broader range of subtleties. This has led to the creation of new flavour profiles which have become a favourite among female wine enthusiasts.

"My husband prefers bolder tastes. He likes wines that you drink at midnight with a cigar, while I like elegant expressions that are more restrained," said Tait.

Tait, whose passion for making wines has been a lifetime affair, finds barrel aging one of her favourite activities, giving Gold Hill its characteristic handmade, mature, award-winning wines, from golden Sauvignon Blanc to their signature red-velvet Cabernet Franc.

At Lakeside Cellars, we drank the trademark tarty Orange Muscat which complemented the fall trees that were turning furious shades of crimson and saffron around us.

As we wound our way through the valley, we saw bulbous squash, the colour of pirate coins, glinting in the light, in front of local markets.

At Kismet Estate Winery, Manpreet Dhalwal is the very example of the changing face of this town's wine industry.

"Being one of the first and only Indo-Canadian woman winemakers in Canada, I feel that I am breaking boundaries and stereotypes daily," said the 26-year-old Dhalwal.



Viticultivist Val Tait of award-winning Gold Hill Winery leans to "elegant expressions that are more restrained." *GOLD HILL WINERY*



The striking twin angel sculptures at Phantom Creek Estates greet visitors to the winery. *TASLIM BURKOWICZ*

Several generations of her family were farmers in Punjab in northern India, and even now, Kismet Winery harvests nearly 240 hectares of grapes for other wineries, keeping the best 10 per cent for themselves. Every year, Kismet ties in their roots with their love of wine by throwing Holi and Diwali events, where they set up interactive booths with street snacks, jewelry, drinks and a bar service.

Marching around in heavy work boots, Dhalwal showed us her

family's winemaking enterprise, which is set directly next to Masala Bistro, where you can delight in curries and gourmet paneer pakoras, paired with Kismet wine.

Women are not only changing wine and the Eurocentric ideas of food pairing, but how wineries interact with the community.

As we sipped the trademark tarty Orange Muscat which complemented the tangerine light shimmering on the lake visible from the winery's porch, wine manager Danielle Dhalwal of

Lakeside Cellars explained how her winery hosts yoga on the lake, candle-making, wreath-making, and painting, as a way of integrating a sense of camaraderie into Osoyoos.

"The local community is important to us," she said.

As such, Lakeside wants to make sure retirees are engaged and included in activities. Danielle's sister Megan Jentsch, who has artwork featured in the winery, will be running one interactive workshop.


Growing up on her family's farm in Oliver, after completing a diploma in business, Danielle found herself right back in familiar farming territory after marrying her husband, Ricky Dhalwal, a viticulturist.

Lakeside Cellars also offers a unique product which the locals love: frizzante in a can, a fun, affordable, sparkling drink.


The writer was hosted by Destination B.C. No one from Destination B.C. or the wineries vetted this article before publication.



Kismet Estate wines can be paired with the Indian delicacies at Masala Bistro next door. *NORA HAMADE*



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