



Raising a glass to the Okanagan's **Half Corked Marathon**

Part costume party, part wine tour and part half-marathon, this annual event through the vineyards of B.C.'s Osoyoos-Oliver Wine Region, offers a uniquely Canadian way to experience wine country

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BY ROBIN ESROCK



Bordeaux might offer a boozy annual marathon through its vineyards, but Canada's equivalent is more manageable, more enjoyable, and arguably more beautiful. Welcome to the [Half Corked Marathon](#), a fun run through the lush wineries and stunning views of British Columbia's Osoyoos-Oliver Wine Region. There is simply no other half-marathon in the world quite like it. I say this while wearing shiny gold pants, a velvet cape, and a printed shirt of a bloated belly sloshing with fine wine. A shirt that, come to think of it, was entirely unnecessary.



Runners refresh at wine tasting stations, which offer small samples of wine, fresh water and plenty of encouragement. (Photo: Robin Esrock)

You don't have to be in tremendous shape to run the annual Half Corked Marathon, which is especially helpful for those of us in no shape at all. This year's route was mostly flat, with 13 wine stations to replenish with red, white, rosé, bubbly, fruity, and even frozen refreshments along the way.

For almost 20 years, the Half Corked Marathon has provided a fine excuse to visit one of B.C.'s most beautiful regions, a unique landscape of sagebrush desert, sparkling lakes, neat vineyards and orchards bursting with juicy stone fruit. Centred around the year-round lakeside resort town of Osoyoos, this is vintage wine country for anyone in search of an active culinary getaway.

Don't fret too much about the run: nobody is tracking your time, although if you don't reach the finish line within the allotted three and a half hours, you can hop aboard a support bus bringing up the rear. Don't fret too much

about the distance either — the route is typically 20 to 24 kilometres long, meaning you could almost walk the whole thing. This is especially true if you take advantage of the optional bus ride to carve a few kilometres up a steep hill (which I highly encourage). As for the drinking, don't fret about that either. The wine tastings are small, optional, and always accompanied by water hydration stations. Driving? Don't fret. Shuttles pick up and drop off runners directly at their hotels or accommodations. Needless to say, the goal of this exceptionally well-organized event is to ensure you don't fret about anything.



The theme of this year's event was Superheroes, resulting in a fine assortment of Incredibles, Captain Underpants, Supergirls, Batmans, and various costume mashups. If Marvel could turn Thor and Hercules into superheroes, I figured I could run as Dionysus, the God of Wine, accompanied by a purple-clad sidekick named Late Harvest, the Temporal Vigilante.

We trained together with outstanding wine tasting at Nk'Mip Cellars, the first Indigenous-owned winery in North America. Warm-ups involved heaps of melt-in-the-mouth brisket courtesy of Pit Stop Smokery's food truck at the Lakeside Cellars Tailgate Party. We stretched with glasses of Merlot, Viognier and Meritage at the Block Party hosted by the female-owned-and-operated Nostalgia Wines. These sold-out events are popular weekend add-ons, inviting runners into participating wineries for dining, drinking and dancing.

I'm immediately struck by the event's gender ratio: about 90 per cent of this year's 1,800 participants are women, many trading their daily routines for a well-earned and much-appreciated weekend getaway. I meet runners from Ottawa, Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto. Even a few from Boston, Chicago and California.

While the Sauvignon Blanc definitely flows, the atmosphere throughout is welcoming, cordial, responsible, uplifting, and fun. Evening events are early enough to ensure plenty of rest, or in our case, time on our third-floor patio to watch a dramatic storm blow across Osoyoos Lake. There might have been a choice bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon to accompany the lightning show.



Dionysus and Late Harvest toast the vines. Despite the wine on offer, responsible consumption is encouraged throughout the race. (Photo: Robin Esrock)



Having picked up our registration package, we board a yellow school bus for our assigned wave, which starts at 9:30 a.m. It's a perfect spring day in the Okanagan: sunny skies, cool temperatures, clear views of the lake and neat vines carpeting the major wine-producing Black Sage Road and Golden Mile. Everyone is in costume, spirits are high, and Half Corked veterans are reassuring us newbies that we'll be just fine.



While the popular event continues to grow each year, there were thousands of applicants for the limited number of race spots. We'll see them all at the finish line in Oliver Community Park, devouring paella and rehydrating with more wine tastings on a carpet of thick grass. But first, we have to earn it.

An announcer counts us down, and off we go.

Endorsed by BC Athletics, the event encourages participants to run at least five kilometres. It's perfectly acceptable to walk much of the route — many of us do. Naturally, you'll make encouraging friends along the way, and occasionally, there are locals camped on the side of a road, holding signs that read "Hurry up, my arms are getting tired."



My personal approach to wine, whether I'm on a [canal boat in the Loire Valley](#) or exploring a new wine region, is simple: wine only tastes as good as the company or environment in which you enjoy it. I can confirm it tastes excellent when served in tiny containers under a tent during a cheeky costumed half-marathon. I stick to the chilled whites on offer, detouring for delicious sangria and refreshing red wine slushies.

Like Sirens of the Seven Seas, it's tempting to just take a seat by the wineries and enjoy their stellar valley views, but the call of the finish line is fierce. If the glittering and gleeful Golden Girls can keep going — and even skip the bus up the hill — then I can do it too. Well, maybe not the bus up the hill. Everyone on board agrees it is the best thing to happen since the introduction of bottle twist-caps.

Tracking our progress with a run app, the kilometres dissolve at each wine-tasting station. My leg muscles kindly carried me down a hill to the finish line, although they have some painful words for me in the days to come. I cross the line on my hands and knees for dramatic effect, restoring some humility to the God of Wine. Late Harvest fared better, clocking in a few minutes ago to greet me with a well-earned cup of chilled rosé.

The atmosphere in the park is one of elation, exhaustion, and personal accomplishment. Yes, there were some serious runners who rocked the route with impressive speed, but the majority of us feel exceedingly proud of ourselves. And that, of course, deserves another toast: to finishing the Half Corked Marathon, making friends, and discovering a beautiful corner of Canada along the way. 🍷



Robin Esrock (aka Dionysis) meets up with the Golden Girls. (Photo: Jon Rothbart)



If you go:

Where to stay: For something special, book a room in the all-suite [Spirit Ridge Resort](#), part of Hyatt's Unbound Collection. Situated on the traditional territory of the Osoyoos Indian Band, the resort and spa is next to [Nk'Mip Cellars](#) (North America's first Indigenous-owned winery), the nine-hole Sonora Dunes Golf Course, and the excellent [NK'MIP Desert Cultural Centre](#). Special weekend rates are also available at the Coast Oliver Hotel, Four Points by Sheraton Penticton, and the Holiday Inn Osoyoos.

Where to eat: The Half Corked Marathon takes place over a weekend that includes additional ticketed events like the Tailgate Party, the Block Party, and an outstanding family-style Dinner at the Farm. Entry includes tastings from a range of excellent local food trucks and multiple winery tastings. Don't miss the brisket at Oliver's [Pit Stop Smokery food truck](#)! There's excellent dining at Sweetgrass at Spirit Ridge, and the all-day 'Eggies' breakfast sandwiches at [Barn Owl Eatery](#) are legendary.

Good to know: Tickets include race entry, transportation to the Start Line and pick-up from the finish line, lunch at the Finish Line, wine and food tastings along the race course, and a welcome bag with exclusive offers and discounts from wineries and event sponsors. Costumes are popular, but like wine tastings on the route, are not mandatory. The finish line party is free and open to non-participants. Due to high demand, tickets are sold by lottery. Responsible consumption is both required and expected. The race course varies slightly each year to incorporate participating wineries.

To register for next year's event or for more information about the Half Corked Marathon, visit: <https://oliverosoyoos.com/half-corked-marathon/>