



# MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

"A bottle of white, a bottle of red, perhaps a bottle of rose instead", join Jane Finn as she savours the flavours of Canada's Wine Country

Writing this article was a challenge. Not because I had to sample so many delectable wines to make sure you would be delighted with my picks, but because Canada's wine scene is as varied and diverse as the country's landscape. From coast to coast, I've had the privilege of meeting passionate growers and world-class winemakers. I've walked with them in their vineyards, visited their cellars and spent more than a bit of time in their tasting rooms learning how to pair, serve, buy and enjoy a good bottle of wine. I've also gained a whole new appreciation for the vision, grit, and determination it takes to produce award-winning wines by listening to the stories of people who make a life and a living, sharing their labour of love.

## TIDE & VINE

It's a sparkling summer day as I make my way to our table on the Crush Pad patio. Beyond the rows of grapes glistening in the summer sun, I can see the cliffs at Minas Basin. Earlier that day, I had hiked Burntcoat Head to explore the legendary tides in the Bay of Fundy. It was breathtaking to watch the waters crest to more than 47 metres and then recede to reveal unique rock formations, including sea stacks, submerged caves and tidal pools brimming with periwinkles, rock crabs and tiny, Tommy codfish. I thought nothing could match the energy of the pounding sea until I met up with Pete and Geena at Lockett Vineyards, who have a knack for making strangers feel like friends.

Pete is a Nottinghamshire transplant, visionary and entrepreneur who has long declared he "is in the feel-good business, not the food and wine business." That this is more than a mission statement is evident as he and daughter Geena make their way around the tables; their infectious laughter and down-home East Coast charm have everyone in the crowd beaming.

I'm here to catch up with old friends. Within minutes of sitting down, a charcuterie

board ideal for sharing arrives at our table, accompanied by a perfectly chilled bottle of Buried White. The conversation flows, and before we know it, the afternoon has turned to evening, and our ride is waiting to take us back to Halifax. Before hopping in the car, I take one more look around. There's a line-up at the bright red British Telecom phone box that sits squarely in the centre of the vineyard, where guests can call anywhere in the world for free. Judging from the queue, it's evident that Lockett wines "are worth phoning home about!"

In Nova Scotia, no vineyard is located more than 20 kilometres from the sea. This fact inspired local winemakers to collaborate in creating Canada's first appellation vintage - Tidal Bay. Each year, only 12 wineries are selected to make this bright, crisp wine. Each must follow a strict set of standards, though each winemaker can put their unique stamp on the product. After I learned the history of Tidal Bay, I decided to make it my mission to taste every contributor's brand, and I'm glad I did. Some were more acidic, more minerally or more fruit-forward than others, but all were delicious. It's so hard to choose, but in the end, a bottle from Lightfoot & Wolfville and another from Benjamin Bridge accompanied me home, along with boxes of live lobster, Digby scallops and fresh mussels – for a family feast when I land.

## NEXT STOP – CENTRAL CANADA

I live within striking distance of the Niagara Peninsula, part of a UNESCO biosphere and one of the country's most prolific wine regions. It's home to the powerful, raging Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake – a historic site, considered the 'prettiest town in Canada.' It's a region where luxury is the norm, with an incredible array of wineries from small boutiques to grand estates, quaint shops, Victorian inns and exceptional eateries that →



Left: Visitors can stand in the vineyard at Lockett's and call anywhere in the world for free to share their experience  
Below: A bottle of crisp Tidal Bay pairs beautifully with a charcuterie board brimming with locally produced artisan meats, cheeses and preserves

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keep travellers, myself included coming back for a day, a weekend or a week of exploration, relaxation and rejuvenation.

### ONTARIO'S BEST KEPT SECRET

Thirty Bench Winery sits on the Beamsville Bench, a narrow plateau that slopes gently from the Niagara Escarpment to four separate vineyards situated on 57-acres. The picturesque venue makes 'Bend and Bubbles' - yoga in the vineyard, followed by a brunch box and a glass of sparkling Riesling, the perfect start to my day. From the Wood Post Lot, it's a short stroll to The Cottage for a 'Back Vintage' tasting experience and the chance to catch up with winemaker Emma Garner. As I sip a glass of Wild Cask Riesling 2016, Emma guides my tasting experience so I can fully appreciate the honeyed notes of fruit and crisp acidity of this wonderfully aromatic wine. Renowned for their 'small lot' vintages, often less than 300 cases each year, I'm reminded that "Thirty Bench wines are hard to find. And, they are also hard to forget!" and I leave with more than one bottle tucked into my bag.

Strewn Winery makes an outstanding Chardonnay, one of my husband's favourites, but Strewn initially got my attention because it was Canada's first wine cookery school. I've spent many a Saturday morning in their bright, modern kitchen overlooking the herb garden and BBQ patio. The space is ideal for eight people who love food and wine to make a shared meal. I'm proud to say that every summer when local produce is at its peak, I've been able to replicate the Strawberry Arugula Salad to a tee, and it's now my signature picnic dish.

Canada may not have invented icewine, but Ontario can justifiably claim to be the world's largest producer. Traditionally icewines are made from Vidal grapes, but thanks to the recommendation of a good friend, the Cabernet Franc variety has become a luxury gift I love to give and receive. Strewn produces a vintage founder Jane Langdon describes as voluptuous. It's a beautiful pinkish colour, not too sweet and more complex. It paired wonderfully with the strawberry rhubarb crisp we made. When I want a sweet indulgence at home, I drizzle it over vanilla ice cream and enjoy every bite

while reminiscing about my last visit and planning my next.

### MOUNTAINS, LAKES AND DESERT?

When asked to describe BC, majestic snow-capped mountains, glittering lakes, dense rainforests, and the rugged Pacific Coast are the images that immediately spring to mind. That is until I make my way to Oliver, the self-proclaimed Wine Capital of Canada, and discover a whole new part of my country I didn't know existed. As I drive through the Okanagan Valley, it's as rich and fertile as I remembered it, but the landscape changes dramatically as I near the southern tip. Perched on the edge of the Sonoran Desert, I'm now in Osoyoos. Gone are the green fields, fruit trees and flowers replaced by red earth, boulders and cacti. There's even a difference in the air, and I am full of anticipation about what lies ahead.

My first stop is the Oliver Tourism Office because I have to ask how this little town of fewer than 5,000 people came to be known as the Wine Capital of Canada. The story goes that in 2001 when Kenn Oldfield, one of the



Top Right: Flowers cascade along the boulevard amongst the restaurants, boutiques and art galleries on Queen Street in Old Town Niagara-on-the-Lake



Right: Enjoy delicious seasonal dishes and a great wine selection at The Epicurean  
Below: The majestic Horseshoe Falls, the largest of the triad you can view in Niagara Falls



Peter Miller

“Kenn Oldfield, one of the founders of Tinhorn Creek Vineyards and then President of the Chamber of Commerce, discovered Oliver had two more wineries than Niagara-on-the-Lake, he declared Oliver the country’s Wine Capital, and the moniker stuck.”

founders of Tinhorn Creek Vineyards and then President of the Chamber of Commerce, discovered Oliver had two more wineries than Niagara-on-the-Lake, he declared Oliver the country’s Wine Capital, and the moniker stuck. That’s a pretty bold and brash statement that’s both inspirational and aspirational for the more than 40 wineries that make the Osoyoos a premier wine destination.

It’s too early to check into my hotel, so I take advantage of the time to visit the newly opened, ultra-modern District Wine Village, a cluster of 13 micro wineries, a craft brewery, a distillery and an eatery built around a sunken, 600-person amphitheatre. In Canada, a first of its kind, each vendor presses, ferments, and bottles their wine on-site, making it all too easy for me to while away the afternoon people watching as I hop from one establishment to another.

When I check in to Spirit Ridge, it’s dusk, and my timing couldn’t have been better. The dancing flames radiating from the giant, gorgeously hand-crafted firepit illuminate the entranceway, speak to my soul and fire up my imagination. As my head hits the pillow, I find myself dreaming of possibilities as I allow the desert to weave her magic.

I awake to infinite blue skies, and I am soon walking the Chopaka Lookout Trail for a bird’s eye view of the valley and nearby mountains. As I approach Chief’s Lookout, the stillness



of the morning gives way to the excited voices of a group of climbers preparing to rappel down a 65-metre cliff to the desert floor. Their enthusiasm is palpable, and my adrenaline is pumping as I watch them descend, but I have to admit that the fact I didn’t have a reservation saved me from having to decide if I had the nerve to make that leap of faith.

My heartbeat slows as I leisurely make my way back to the Nk’Mip (Inkameep) Desert Cultural Centre. The heady scent of sage rises to greet me as my legs brush the plants that line

the trail, and I can feel its cleansing healing power. The next few hours are a gift as I take a deeper dive into the Osoyoos First Nations culture, heritage and traditions. I’m fascinated by the legends of Coyote – Sen’Klip – the ‘Great Trickster’ who according to ancient lore who teaches us not to take ourselves too seriously. At the same time, still, be respectful to people and the planet.

There was so much to discover that I’m reluctant to pull myself away. Still, I don’t want to be late for my tasting session with →

Top: Nk’Mip Cellars  
Bottom Left: Jill Richardson Brandby introduces world-class wines  
Middle: Grapevines thrive in the Osoyoos Desert  
Below Right: Welcome to Oliver, Canada’s wine capital!



winemaker Justin Hall at NK'MIP Cellars, North America's first Indigenous-owned and operated Winery. Today, he's serving up a flight from their premier series – Qwam Qwmt that translates as “achieving excellence.” There is no doubt that these are award winners, but that's only one part of the story. What's even more spectacular is the entire team's commitment to protecting the environment for those who will follow in our footsteps.

When Justin speaks, his face lights up not with pride but with joy as he describes, in one simple sentence, the spirit of their venture, “The land teaches us the power of patience and the pleasure of sharing.”

### TRULY A FAMILY AFFAIR

At Quails Gate, near Kelowna, this same spirit is evident. When ‘Poppa Dick’ purchased this little piece of heaven on earth in 1956,

he sowed the seeds of generosity that would support his family and left his mark community. Hardworking and humble, Dick Stewart had the foresight to plant blocks of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes that are now some of the oldest in the Okanagan Valley. He and his children have also led the way in introducing and expanding sustainable growing practices, reinforcing the family's guiding principle to “always be a gracious host” - not only to the visitors they serve but the land itself.

I arrive at Quails Gate just in time for the last Vineyard Tasting of the day. As we move between pergolas sipping on the newest releases, I'm also drinking in the panoramic views of Okanagan Lake and the adjacent estates that stretch as far as the eye can see. Then we're off to dinner at the Old Vines Restaurant, which in my opinion, has to be one of the most romantic restaurants in the

country. The architecture is stunning, the food and wine are remarkable, but it's the service and attention to detail that make you feel like you're alone in a crowd—a truly fitting ending to a seven-day vacation in BC Wine Country.

These are only a few of my highlights, but trust me, don't be afraid to venture out and nudge yourself in new directions. You'll meet incredibly talented vintners, make new friends and discover your personal favourites while creating memories along the way.

I'm not sure who said it, but someone once told me there is more philosophy in a bottle of wine than all the books in the library. Now I know that's true as I uncork that bottle of Nk'Mip's Dreamcatcher that's been calling my name and plan my next trip in search of the nectar of the goddess.

**Far left: Stroll through a vineyard at night is stellar experience**  
**Top Middle: The Old Vine Restaurant**  
**Bottom Middle: Spending time in a barrel room is a heady experience**  
**Bottom Right: Quails Gate with views of Lake Okanagan and the Columbia Mountains**

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## JOURNEY PLANNER

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Spirit Ridge

T: +1 250-495-5445

E: spiritridge.reservations@hyatt.com

W: hyatt.com/en-US/hotel/canada/spirit-ridge/ylwub

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Crush Pad Patio at Luckett Vineyards

T: +1 902-542-2600

W: luckettvineyards.com

#### The Epicurean

T: +1 905-468-3408

W: opentable.ca

#### Old Vines Restaurant at Quails' Gate Winery

T: +1 250.769.4451

Reservations: opentable.ca

W: www.quailsgate.com

### THINGS TO DO

#### Burntcoat Head Park

T: +1 902-369-2529

W: burntcoatheadpark.ca

#### Thirty Bench

T: +1 905-563-1698

E: info@thirtybench.com

W: thirtybench.com

#### Strewn Winery & Cooking School

T: +1 905-468-1779

#### Oliver District Wine Village

T: +1 250-535-1575

E: info@districtwinevillage.com

#### Nk' Mip Desert Cultural Heritage Centre

T: +1 250-495-7901

W: nykipdesert.com and www.corporateheights.ca

#### NK'MIP Cellars

T: +1 250-535-1575

E: info@nkmipcellars.com