

This happy hour that never ends

By Kimberley Fehr, Special to the Province March 20, 2012



Don Adams serves up a bottle at Ryan Patrick Vineyards.

Within minutes of arriving in the Bavaria of America — a.k.a. Leavenworth, Washington — all notions of drinking beer in Oktoberfest steins are abandoned. This ski town is cuter than a Fraulein's dimple and bedecked with all the German kitsch imaginable: nutcrackers, gingerbread facades, sausage gardens and more. But my travelling companion and I agree: Who needs beer when you can have wine? And there's a lot of wine in Leavenworth.

The mad proliferation of wine-tasting rooms means that in just three short blocks on Front Street, one can sample wines from 13 wineries. Spend the day hiking the trails of the Okanagan-

Wenatchee National Forest and then spend the late afternoon/evening stumbling from one wine-tasting to another and when you're done stumble home to your hotel room (if you can).

We start in the late afternoon at Ryan Patrick Vineyards where Don Adams greets us, lips curling up in a perpetual Cheshire cat smile that suggests a gourmet diet fortified by vintage wines. He pours us a taste of the 2008 Rock Island Red, a Meritage that proves to be a fitting start to a never-ending happy hour. My nose rejoices as the black cherry aroma commingles with black currant, followed by hints of vanilla bean, mocha and spices.

“When I moved here in 1995, there were 13 art galleries and no tasting rooms. Now there are 13 tasting rooms and three art galleries,” says Adams, his voice as smooth as the wine he pours. “It’s really exploded in the last few years.”

Famous for its ability to reinvent itself, Leavenworth was a depressed logging centre in the 1960s until its LIFE committee (Leavenworth Improvement for Everyone) decided a Bavarian makeover was just the thing to shake off the economic doldrums. Nearly 50 years and millions of visitors later (the town had 2.5 million visitors last year), wine is the latest wave of business improvement.

Instead of bringing the people to the wineries (though there are plenty of nearby wine trails if one seeks the ambience of actual vineyards), they are bringing the wine to the people.

Some of the wine tasting rooms are from further afield, like Kestrel Vintners, whose home base is about 2.5 hours south in Prosser, and opened the first Leavenworth tasting room back around 2003.

One glance at the Kestrel tasting menu and I’m sold; five tastings for \$5, culminating in a choice of ice wine or port. Most wineries charge anywhere from \$2 to \$10 for a tasting flight and waive the fee with the purchase of a bottle, so you might as well buy one.

Our suave wine pourer Will Piro looks almost misty eyed as he pours the 2010 Pinot Gris.

“There’s the perception that wine tasting is very bourgeoisie ... and it’s not. Winemakers are just people living off the land. Living close to the land. There’s a great tradition here of fruit growers and orchards and winemaking just naturally flows out of it.”

We work our way through the tastings to the finale, a Kestrel 2008 Signature Editions Port. It’s everything I dreamt a port could be — a blackberry-raspberry nose tempered with the scent of figs, neither coily sweet or officiously dry.

Compulsively, I drift over to the cash register in a happy buzz and whip out my Visa to take home a bottle.

Four steps down the street, we find the Taste of Icicle Ridge Winery. Why stop now? Descending the stairs, we step into a spacious cavern where small groups of people huddle at cozy tables by the fireplace. It feels like home — if your home was a large, successful winery.

Like many winemakers here, Icicle Ridge founders Louie Wagoner and his wife Judy were fruit growers, running a pear farm. But by the year 2000, cheap imports had taken their toll on pear prices and they diversified into wine.

Staff person Barbara Adams says the Wagoners and winemaker Don Wood started small with 50 cases thinking they'd never get rid of this, serving it to friends around the hand-carved dining room table at their 5,000-square-foot log home. Word of mouth flowed like the wine and the operation grew to the point the family had to move out of the log home because it became the heart of their business.

“We want people to feel like they are family here, by bringing them into our home and treating them that way,” says Adams, pouring us a glass of the 2010 The Blondes.

My family never treats me this well.

The tasting menu says this Gewürztraminer is like a kiss of honey and I agree. We finish up with their tour de force: Chocolate Cherry Passion dessert wine. Ah, who knew heaven came in a wine glass?

Leavenworth is a four- to five-hour drive from here. For accommodation information, visit www.leavenworth.org

© Copyright (c) The Province

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)