

Fine wine and trail rides

The south Okanagan is a mountain biker's paradise — and the libation just goes with the territory



BY SHELLEY WOOD

SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

OKANAGAN FALLS — We had been pedalling uphill for nearly two hours when we encountered the snake of indeterminate genus coiled in the middle of our path. After a seemingly endless succession of hotly disputed decisions regarding the trail that forked, then forked again, the snake seemed an incontestable sign that we were on the wrong route.

If, like avid mountain-bikers all over the province, you seek out single-track, it pays to remember: When dirt, sunburn, low blood sugar, marital discord and potentially lethal reptiles are going to get in the way of a good mountain-bike ride, you might as well be within cruising distance of some gold-medal-winning wines.

Long-hailed as the summertime vacation destination for water-skiers, cherry-pickers, and sunbathers, the Okanagan Valley is also home to some of the most spectacular dry-land mountain biking in the province. Best known among cycling aficionados for the old Kettle Valley railbed — restored as a biking trail linking Osoyoos to Kelowna and beyond — the Okanagan also has plenty of options for mountain bikers with a yen for something steeper: from rolling, cross-country single-track to gnarly technical downhill. And if you want to pair your cycling with your sipping, there's something for every palate.

Campbell Mountain, Penticton (Rating: Sauvignon Blanc)

For a light, refreshing introduction to the

Okanagan mountain bike scene, Campbell Mountain, on the northeast side of Penticton, is as easy-sipping as they come.

The trail system begins just past the municipal dump, with a dusty parking area well-used by dirt bike riders, 4x4-ers, mountain-bikers, and the occasional bonfire enthusiast. We biked up on rolling single-track trails that gradually narrowed as they wound through trees and open glades offering sparkling views of the lake. At the high point of the trails, we toolled around before selecting one of several dry, fast descents. Good shade, shorter, non-technical trails, and a reasonably easy ascent make this a great trail for kids or beginner riders, or just as a first-ride-of-the-year for a rusty pair of legs or lungs.

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Toasting the trail:

Located a short downhill scoot from the base of Campbell mountain are a handful of wineries including the newly expanded Red Rooster winery, along Naramata road. Just a few more pedal strokes down the road you'll see the turn-off for La Frenz, a lower-key, limited production wine estate whose award-winning boutique wines are only available at the winery and at select wine-stores and restaurants: well worth the visit if you don't mind the short uphill climb off the main road.

Refuelling:

Try the Barrel Room Bistro at the long-running Hillside Estate winery, a few more metres past La Frenz on Naramata Road.

Three Blind Mice: Naramata Bench (Rating: Pinot Gris)

On the Naramata Bench, nestled in the hills between Naramata and Penticton, is the Three Blind Mice riding and hiking area. With longer trails, more varied terrain, and a longer, steeper uptrack, Three Blind Mice attracts riders wanting bigger flavour and a longer finish when they're sampling the trails.

We set off mid-morning on a rutted double track that peels away from the top of Riddle Road. As with the Campbell Mountain trails, the up-trail for Three Blind Mice seems to quickly split into a range of options, making a topo-map of the trails — available at the Penticton Visitor's Centre and at bike stores in Penticton — a valuable asset.

We pushed onwards on a steady uphill climb that lasted about 45 minutes before splitting off at the top on to single-track trails that alternated between rocky and sandy terrain, with

limited technical challenges except for the occasional steeper section. The trails tend to branch one off another, so depending on your energy and enthusiasm, you could try several different routes, spending anywhere from one to several hours yo-yoing on the trails. Like many of the South Okanagan trails, Three Blind Mice is teaming with wildflowers in spring, and golden in the fall, but sizzles in mid-summer, warranting an early morning or late evening visit.

Toasting the trail:

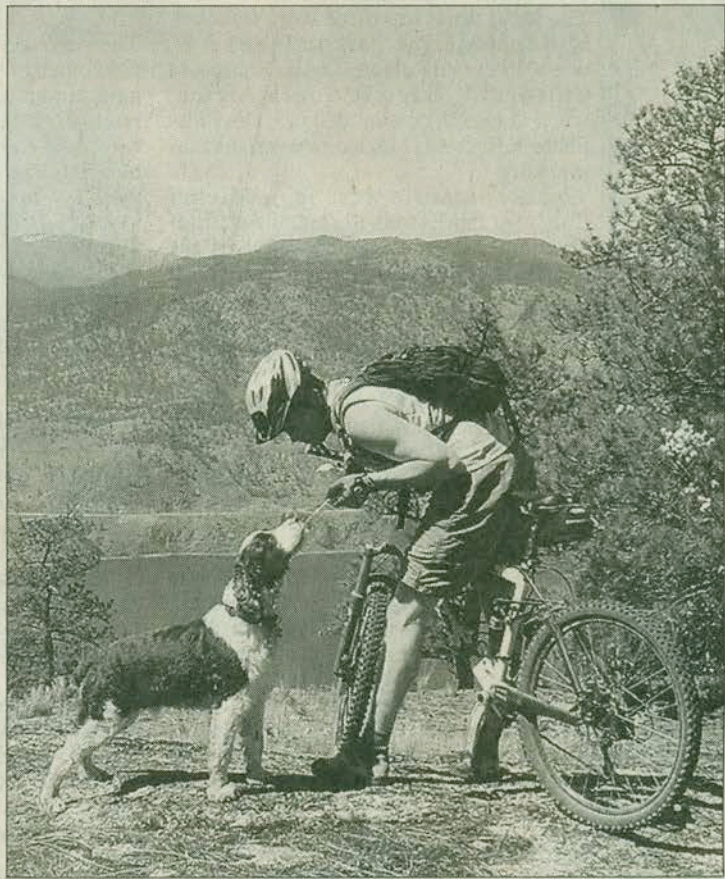
Lesser known wineries at the end of the Naramata Bench include Kettle Valley Winery and Nichol Vineyard, both smaller-production, non-VQA wineries. Kettle Valley has made a name for itself with its well-muscled reds and chardonnay, while Nichol has repeatedly garnered awards for its syrah and pinot noir.

Refuelling:

The Cobblestone Wine Bar and patio, a cosy cellar of a restaurant tucked in the belly of the Naramata Heritage Inn, has a full list of local wines, many available by the glass, letting you accomplish much of the nearby wine route without leaving your seat. Cobblestones is famous for its "hearth bread" that you order piping-hot by the loaf, then choose from a wide selection of different cheeses, spreads, patés, and tapas.

Myra Bellevue Provincial Park, Kelowna: (Rating: Chardonnay to Pinot Noir)

Long before the Myra Bellevue Provincial Park was created in 2001, the region was a well-developed cross-country riding area simply referred to as "Crawford" by the local riders. Myra-Bellevue was off limits for two years following the 2003 wildfires that thrashed through the forest and destroyed hundreds of



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A canine friend greets a biker at the top of Rock Oven, with views of Skaha Lake in the background.

nearby houses, and just reopened in May 2005.

The Crawford trails, ranging from beginner to intermediate/advanced, now have a surreal beauty with luminescent green re-growth contrasting starkly with stands of charred, towering trees. Park officials and the Kelowna Mountain Bike club are in the process of signposting trails and building a new skills park, but local bike stores can provide trail details. For a short uphill ride and mildly technical descent, consider "Connector." Riders looking for longer uphill climbs with more technical sections on the downhill can slog

their way up to "Vapour" or "Hillbilly."

Toasting the trails:

Pinot Reach winery on Dehart road is a short spin from Myra Bellevue, while a fast road ride down to the lake will get you in the vicinity of Summerhill, Cedar Creek, and St. Hubertus wineries. Summerhill has the claim to fame of being one of the few organic wineries in the Okanagan, while St. Hubertus put itself on the map by being the only winery that lost property (and grape vines) in the 2003 fires; hence the "Fireman's Red."

Refuelling:

Cedar Creek has a terrace patio open for tapas between 11:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., while Summerhill is open for lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch.

Rock Oven, Penticton/ Okanagan Falls (Rating: Cabernet Sauvignon)

For a ride that will truly put your spokes to the test, seek out "Rock Oven," one of the lesser-known jewels of the South Okanagan cross-country mountain-bike scene.

The trail has several entry points: We opted to enter on the single track that begins at the end of end of Sunnybrook Drive in Lakeshore Highlands on the east side of Skaha Lake. After 10 minutes of single track, the trail joins up with an old gravel road that zigzags into the mountains, ultimately transitioning to overgrown fire access road. With no specific information on ride duration, or which fork to take when the track split in two, my partner and I had to scrutinize the dirt for tire tracks, disagreeing passionately about the chosen route.

The up-trail eventually curled around to the right, switching to a gnarled, rocky single-track through thinning forest. After almost two hours of climbing, we were wilted, dusty, rattled by the snake, and contemplating giving up, which is of course when we came across a battered notebook, duct-taped to a tree, with the faded words "The Rock Oven Ride: Please sign in" on its cover.

Beyond the notebook, the single-track dipped and climbed for another half hour before dumping us on to some of the most magnificent downhill in the Okanagan: A combination of drops, chunky technical sections, and swooping faces of sheer rock. Views throughout the downhill ride — at least an

hour's worth of riding beyond the telltale notebook — were the icing on the cake.

Keep in mind: the route isn't called Rock Oven for nothing. The exposed gneiss sections of the trail get torched with full sun, but little breeze, for most of the day, so choose this trail according to the season, leave at the crack of dawn, or wait for the benefit of cloud cover.

Toasting the trail:

If you're not already charred to a crisp at the end of this ride, there's a winery nearby to finish you off. The small estate winery of Blasted Church, located a few kilometres south of the Rock Oven trailhead en route to Okanagan Falls is as renowned for its award-winning wines as it is for its quirky labels and names, including "Blastphemy" and "Hatfield's Fuse."

Refuelling: Tickleberries, just south of Okanagan Falls, sells ice cream, fudge, and "ticklebeans," in every flavour under the sun. Except rattlesnake.

Shelley Wood is a Kelowna freelance writer.

On the Web

Bike trails:

www.trailpeak.com provides descriptions, statistics, and reviews for many of the mountain bike trails around the Okanagan.

Winery information and tasting/wine shop hours can be found on winery websites:

www.redroosterwinery.com

www.hillsideestate.com

www.lafrenzwinery.com

www.nicholvineyard.com

www.kettlevalleywinery.com

www.st-hubertus.bc.ca

www.summerhill.bc.ca

www.cedarcreek.bc.ca

www.blastedchurch.com