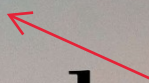


Decanter Magazine - Rocky Creek is mentioned!



# Vancouver Island

## A wine lover's guide

Lying just off British Columbia's west coast, this Pacific-facing island may not be Canada's best-known wine tourism draw, but it offers a bounty of hidden gems. And vying for the accolade of Canada's warmest place, it's the perfect destination for a winter getaway

STORY NICOLE MACKAY

Only a 90-minute ferry ride from Vancouver in Canada's western province of British Columbia (BC), or a 50-minute seaplane journey from Seattle in the US, a lush isle beckons with artisanal wineries and a unique climate. It's Vancouver Island, a relatively unknown wine appellation, but a charming and convenient destination for enthusiasts.

While Vancouver Island stretches 460km north to south, most winemaking happens in a small area along its southeast coast – the Cowichan Valley, the island's only GI sub-appellation,

“The First Nations Salish translation of Cowichan is “warm land””

which surrounds the city of Duncan and extends between Mill Bay northwest up to Cowichan lake (see maps, p66). Most wineries are on the east coast, off the Saanich Inlet.

A short drive from Victoria – the island's hub city and BC's provincial capital – the Cowichan Valley is a breeze to navigate. The short distance ▶

View of the Inner Harbour at sunset in downtown Victoria (see 'Address book', p69)



## TRAVEL: CANADA

between wineries – at most 20 minutes' drive apart – allows for leisurely exploration.

'Winemaking' on the island dates back 100 years, first using loganberries (a blackberry-raspberry cross) to create fruit wines. The focus turned to grapes in the 1980s with the Duncan Project, a government-led test site initiative. Over seven years, more than 100 grape varieties were trialled before the government withdrew funding. Today, a vibrant community of winemakers produce a diverse array of grapes that reflect the island's individual microclimates.

### WARM WELCOME

Nearby mountains shield the Cowichan Valley from Pacific ocean storms from the west. The First Nations Salish translation of Cowichan is 'warm land', epitomising the area's long, dry growing season with low frost risk. Thanks to a year-round average temperature warmer than anywhere else in Canada, the island's climate is known as 'Maritime Mediterranean'.

Hybrid varieties such as Ortega, Auxerrois and Maréchal Foch were the focus in the early days, while today – thanks in part to climate change – some *Vitis vinifera* flourish, particularly Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris. However, Chardonnay will soon be the most planted white grape variety.

This potential has attracted international investment. California-based Jackson Family Wines (JFW) owns two Cowichan Valley properties, accounting for 53ha of the island's area under vine: 130ha according to the BC Wine Grape Council's report for 2022.

JFW family members bought Unsworth ([unsworthvineyards.com](http://unsworthvineyards.com)) in 2020, focusing on sustainable vineyard practices. Disease-resistant cross-varieties developed by Swiss geneticist Valentin Blattner since the 1980s, such as Petite Milo, Cabernet Libre and Labelle, play an important role in Unsworth's signature white and red blends Allegro and Symphony respectively. Its Charme de L'Île sparkling wines (a trademarked concept used by Vancouver Island producers who make Charmat-method wines) are BC's most accessible expressions of the style.

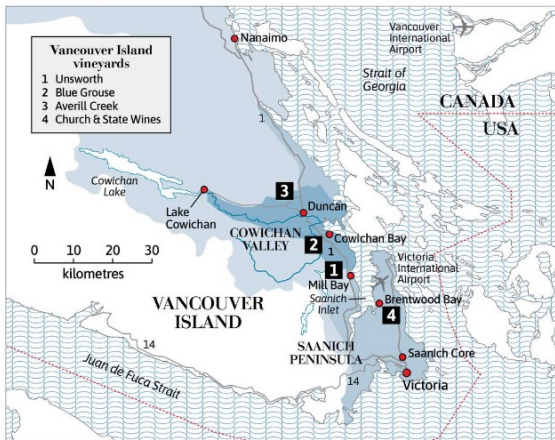
In 2022, JFW also acquired Blue Grouse ([bluegrouse.ca](http://bluegrouse.ca)), one of Cowichan Valley's pioneering wineries. Its portfolio centres around Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and 30-year-old dry-farmed Pinot Gris. Annual production is about 84,000 bottles, set to increase to 120,000.

### PLAN AHEAD

While most of Vancouver Island's wineries offer a year-round visiting experience, it's worth planning ahead in the off-season, as some limit their tasting hours. At the same time, it's common for



Unsworth's Charme de L'Île sparkling Pinot Noir rosé



### How to get there

There are frequent flights to Victoria International (at Sidney) from Canada's major cities (such as Vancouver: 30 mins, from \$106/£64), but renting a car is necessary to visit wineries. Several daily ferries run from Vancouver (1hr 35mins into Swartz Bay, adults CA\$17.20/£10). From Seattle, consider the seaplane route (50-75 mins, from about \$200/£117 per person) or the Clipper ferry (2hrs 45mins, from about \$99/£58 per person).

restaurants to close on Mondays and Tuesdays. Averill Creek ([averillcreek.ca](http://averillcreek.ca)), about 12km from the coast, is a must-visit in winter when it offers its popular Alpine cheese fondue and wine pairing experience (CA\$50/£29 + tax per person, reservations required). Its tasting room and ▶



Viewable from Malahat Skywalk, the impressive volcanic peak of Mount Baker lies almost as far northwest as you can get in the USA

## MY PERFECT DAY IN VANCOUVER ISLAND

### MORNING & LUNCH

Wake up to the gentle sounds of waves at Oceanfront Suites\* in the charming community of Cowichan Bay. Stroll to nearby **Leeward Cafe** (@leewardcafe) for a quick breakfast sandwich and honey-sweetened chai latte before browsing in the waterfront shops or, for the adventurous, taking to the water with **Cowichan Bay Kayaking** (+1.250.597.3031). In your rental car, head to Averill Creek (see p66) to enjoy one of three tastings that you have already

booked – guided, self-guided or the full package, including private vineyard and cellar tour. You could stay and order from the snack menu, or head where the locals go: **Hank's Cowichan** (hankscowichan.com), about 15 minutes' drive away and a great sit-down stop for a homemade soup and sandwich. Alternatively from Hank's, grab some **Pickles' Pantry** (picklespantry.ca) pâté or charcuterie items for an on-the-go snack — also to be found at the Duncan Farmers Market on Saturdays.

### AFTERNOON

After a bite, continue to Blue Grouse Estate Winery (p66), only eight minutes' drive from Cowichan. The modern tasting room is inviting and boasts panoramic views of the vineyards. From here, a 30-minute drive south gets you to the Malahat Skywalk\*, where a spiral wooden ramp leads up to a 32m viewing deck. Soak up the breathtaking scenery of Mount Baker (above) and the Saanich Peninsula before taking the nine-second spiral slide to the bottom. Then make your way to the Mill Bay ferry to cross the inlet. The 25-minute journey runs nearly every hour until 6:30pm (from CA\$32.60/£19 for car with two passengers).

### EVENING

After docking at Brentwood Bay, drive 10 minutes to Church & State (p68) to taste traditional-method artisan sparkling wines. Afterwards, check in and relax at Brentwood Bay Resort & Spa\*. Dinner options include the pub (a great chowder of local fish and clams) or the upscale Arbutus Room, where you can savour seared Hokkaido scallops or Saltspring Island mussels. For more details of entries marked with an asterisk (\*), see p69



Cowichan Bay Kayaking



Whale watching in Cowichan Bay (see 'Address book', p69)

outdoor terrace (when weather permits) offer stunning panorama views of its 13ha of vineyards on the sunny southeast-facing slopes of Mount Prevost. It's the perfect spot to sip Averill Creek's Joue Red, a blend of Foch, Gamay and Pinot Noir, or its wild-ferment Westholm Pinot Gris.

At family-run **Rocky Creek** ([rockycreekwinery.ca](http://rockycreekwinery.ca)), in tourist season 30- to 45-minute tastings are available at a modest charge, and spring and summer are best for enjoying an informal picnic on the patio with wine purchased. But even during winter you can still enjoy a stroll through the gardens next to its estate vineyards before enjoying a local Cabernet Foch or wines from international varieties.

While most of Vancouver Island's wine comes from Cowichan Valley, there are vineyards elsewhere, such as in the Saanich Peninsula, where **Church & State Wines** ([churchandstatewines.com](http://churchandstatewines.com)) has its satellite property. Best known for producing elegant whites and bold reds from the southern Okanagan Valley (mainland BC), Church & State's 8ha island estate (about 5ha planted) is focused on sparkling wines. Try the traditional-method, hand-riddled Gris de Noir, which comes from Saanich-grown Pinot Noir.

## TASTE OF THE ISLAND

Vancouver Island boasts a robust culinary identity that draws foodies as well as wine lovers. Organic produce abounds and menus feature freshly caught Pacific salmon and succulent



Above: Church & State Wines (see left)

Dungeness crab, while farm-to-table dining showcases the island's bounty of artisanal cheeses and grass-fed meats.

Wine festivals add another layer of allure. Averill Creek's Noir Fest, in late June, celebrates Pinot Noir from across BC ([averillcreek.ca/noir-fest](http://averillcreek.ca/noir-fest)). In the warmth and full bloom of August, the Cowichan Valley Wine Festival ([@cowichanwineries](http://cowichanwineries)) spotlights local wines, dishes and live entertainment. Victoria Wine Festival ([vicwf.com](http://vicwf.com)) wraps up the season around harvest time in late September, with winery dinners and events aimed at both consumers and wine trade.

Whatever the season, and whether you're a seasoned oenophile or a casual sipper, Vancouver Island promises unforgettable experiences.

Note:  
All other wineries mentioned are larger corporate wineries; we are very pleased to get mentioned.



The spiral staircase and accessible viewing ramps of the Malahat Skywalk tower, just south of Mill Bay

## YOUR VANCOUVER ISLAND ADDRESS BOOK

### ACCOMMODATION

#### **Brentwood Bay Resort**

This waterfront sanctuary offers luxurious accommodations, spa indulgence and panoramic views. It's a tranquil escape where elegance meets natural beauty. [brentwoodbayresort.com](http://brentwoodbayresort.com)

#### **Oceanfront Suites at Cowichan Bay**

Perfect for nature lovers, Cowichan Bay is an idyllic and historic waterfront community with breathtaking views, known for its independent shops and cafés. [oceanfrontcowichanbay.com](http://oceanfrontcowichanbay.com)

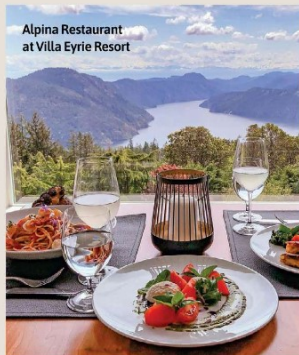
#### **Parkside Hotel & Spa**

A luxurious central spot in Victoria to start or end your trip, blending modern elegance with environmental sustainability in its spacious suites and rooftop gardens. [parksidevictoria.com](http://parksidevictoria.com)

### FOOD & DRINK

#### **Alpina Restaurant at Villa Eyrie Resort**

For menus that infuse local ingredients with traditional Alpine European flavours, accompanied by breathtaking 270° views of the Olympic mountains, Mount Baker and the Saanich Inlet, this is a dining experience



Alpina Restaurant at Villa Eyrie Resort

elevated in every aspect. [villaeyrie.com/alpina-restaurant](http://villaeyrie.com/alpina-restaurant)

#### **Little Jumbo**

A must-visit in Victoria for gastronomic adventurers, with an intimate setting and inventive menu that showcases locally sourced ingredients and craft cocktails. [littlejumbo.ca](http://littlejumbo.ca)

#### **The Lakehouse at Shawnigan**

A serene hideaway with views overlooking the lake. It supports local distilleries,

ceridies, breweries, wineries and farms, so the menu always features seasonal dishes. [athelakehouse.ca](http://athelakehouse.ca)

### THINGS TO DO

#### **Malahat Skywalk**

An awe-inspiring treetop adventure en route to Cowichan Bay, offering panoramic views of forests and mountains for an unforgettable nature experience (CA\$36.95/E22 per adult). [malahatskywalk.com](http://malahatskywalk.com)

#### **Victoria Harbour**

Victoria's downtown area features iconic attractions such as the Parliament Buildings and historic Empress Hotel, plus vibrant street performers along Inner Harbour (pictured, p64). Enjoy scenic walks, boat tours and charming waterfront cafés. [tourismvictoria.com](http://tourismvictoria.com)

#### **Whale watching**

At eco-friendly business Ocean Ecoventures in Cowichan Bay, get up close and personal with marine life (pictured, p68) with expert guides: a thrilling exploration of the ocean's wonders (Cowichan Bay Whale Watching Eco Tour, half day CA\$169/E99 per adult). [oceanecoventures.com](http://oceanecoventures.com)

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