

Flora and Terroir

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Fiona Tapp



Perseval & Young Cheesemongers in downtown Kelowna carries up to 80 varieties of cheese, including customer favourites from the heart of B.C.'s wine country — Upper Bench Winery and Creamery, Poplar Grove and Tanto Latte. PHOTOS BY DEIDRE ISHII AND ALEXANDRA PAUL

Every great glass of wine deserves a crumble, a slice or even a wedge of cheese to accompany it. Not only are we spoiled for choice when it comes to choosing a winery in British Columbia, luckily, we also have a bounty of farm-fresh cheeses to enjoy. Throughout the province, you can find awardwinning brie, perfectly aged cheddars and the softest goats cheese made with fresh milk. Tour the beautiful wine regions and you'll discover artisan cheesemakers and farmers crafting honest and simple products that wow the taste buds.

Okanagan

The Okanagan is undoubtedly the provincial leader in wine, with more than 80 per cent of British Columbia's vineyard acreage. It's no real surprise then that they also produce many fine cheeses to pair with that perfect glass of vino.

In downtown Kelowna, you can shop at Perseval & Young, a fine cheesemonger carrying up to 80 varieties of cheese from across Canada and the world. Although, as owner Desiree Young says, local is often best. “We believe in the importance of carrying local cheeses and supporting our cheesemakers. We sell a lot of local cheeses, but Upper Bench, Poplar Grove and Tanto Latte are the most popular with our customers.”

Young says that one of the hardest parts about running a cheese shop is finding and sourcing the perfect cheese. “Our suppliers are selected for the quality of the product they send us, not for having the cheapest price. There are so many different producers of certain cheeses and we want to sell the best possible versions of every cheese in our store.”

It’s also very important to Young and her partner, Philip Perseval that they only buy what they need to ensure the product is as fresh as possible. “Our regulars know that we can sell through a wheel of their favourite cheese in a few hours. We would rather run out of cheese than sit on product. So, our cheese moves quickly, but is always fresh.”

Being situated in Kelowna allows Perseval and Young to regularly partner with local wineries and host events — and that makes Young feel grateful to live here. “The wineries are what makes the Okanagan such a special place to be and we feel blessed to say we own a cheese shop in the middle of wine country.”

Perseval & Young Cheesemongers

1046 Richter St., Kelowna

persevalandyoung.ca | 236.420.0187 | @perseval_young_cheese

It's indeed a unique selling point for a cheesemaker or monger to be immersed in wine country. Take Carmelis Goats Cheese, which is located 17 kilometres south of Kelowna and next to renowned wineries, such as CedarCreek Estate Winery and St. Hubertus Winery.

Sandra Proulx owns Carmelis Goat and Terroir Cheese. Although her background is in science, she was drawn to the creative artisanal approach to cheesemaking. “Being an art and a science, a cheesemaker has to really feel when the cheese is ready and the products are more consistent when doing small batches at a time.”

The facility is fairly compact at about 1,200 square feet with an additional 1,800-square-foot ageing room. But that doesn’t hinder their ability to craft fine cheese. Proulx says their Goaty Cow, a brie-style cheese made of half goat and half cows milk, won at the World Championship Cheese Contest in 2016. “We have been ageing our cheese in the same ripening room for 17 years and our flora is unique. The milk also greatly impacts the flavour of the cheese and is unique to the farm, breed and feed.”

In addition to the 25,000 kilograms of cheese it produces in a year, Carmelis Goat Cheese also makes a popular gelato, free from preservatives and available in 24 flavours, “We make some of the best gelato in the Okanagan,” Proulx proudly says.

Carmelis Goats Cheese

170 Timberline Rd., Kelowna, B.C.

carmelisgoatcheese.com | 250.764.9033 | @carmelisgoatcheese

Upper Bench Winery and Creamery holds the best of both worlds. In an ideal pairing, winemaker Gavin Miller takes a minimalist approach to making bold-flavoured wines and cheesemaker Shana Miller makes artisanal handmade cheeses, after learning the craft from Poplar Grove's original cheesemaker, Sandra Chalmers.

At the Penticton winery, visitors can indulge in this perfect union. They can learn about the wines, enjoy tastings and watch Shana make cheese through the creamery window. At any one time, the ageing room can contain eight varieties of cheese, ranging from the double-cream brie and Grey Baby, a soft surface-ripened blue cheese to Belper Knolle, a Swiss hard cheese suitable for grating, and Okanagan Sun, a rustic washed-rind cheese with intense flavour.

Upper Bench's cheeses can be purchased at the creamery, on the company's website and in select shops, including Perseval and Young, Wedge Cheeserie in Vernon and The Bench Market in Penticton. The most time-intensive products Shana crafts are the washedrind cheeses, which she says need the most affinage. It's an art to bring out the flora and flavour of the cheese by controlling the humidity, temperature and washing, turning and brushing the wheels.

Although she describes the benefits of having a wine and cheese facility together, for Shana, the cheese will always come first. At the end of a long day, her idea of a wonderful night at home is enjoying a glass of "Upper Bench Merlot with a slab of King Cole blue cheese melted on a nicely cooked steak."

Upper Bench Winery and Creamery

170 Upper Bench Rd. S., Penticton

upperbench.ca | 250.770.1733 | @upperbench



Vancouver Island

Vancouver Island boasts more than 30 licensed wineries and 432 acres of vineland. It's also home to Little Qualicum Cheeseworks at Morningstar Farm. This family-run business, located in Parksville, was started by Nancy and Clarke Gourlay in 2001, after a stint living in Switzerland, where they fell in love with European cheeses.

Now their eldest son, Raymond, continues the tradition along with his brother, John, who manages the herd.

The family welcomes visitors to the farm. “We're one of the few dairy farms that’s completely open and accessible to the public. People are invited to come where we make our cheese and they can wander around, meet the animals, grab a self-guided tour map, have lunch in our café and enjoy our farm,” Raymond says.

Little Qualicum Cheeseworks produces more than a dozen cheeses including best-sellers, such as the Qualicum Spice, flavoured with garlic, onions and paprika, and the creamy Island Brie — one of Raymond’s favourites.

“It's a really good, award-winning brie. It's soft and if you let it ripen close to the best before date, it gets really runny and you can almost spread it on crackers. It pairs amazingly with different jellies and preserves. It's awesome with red wine or with a super wheaty beer.”

One of the benefits of being a farmer and a cheesemaker is that Raymond can closely control the entire process. “We get to decide what our cows eat and what cow's we milk and that determines the quality of the milk. It doesn't get any fresher than farmstead cheese.”

That quality control includes carefully managing the diet of the 50 cows on the farm, which consists predominantly of grass grown in the unique biosphere around Mount Aerosmith. The cows are milked at dawn each day processing 1500 to 1600 litres daily.

Some cheeses, such as the soft varieties, are made in just a day or two, whereas the Mt. Moriarty cheese must mature for a minimum of a year before it's ready to join the 70,000 kilos of cheese they produce annually.

For Raymond, making a delicious artisan cheese is paramount, but he also wants to offer a vital link between food source and consumer. “There's a lot of misconceptions about commercial scale agriculture and food production in general. And it's really important to us that people have opportunities to meet farmers in real life and to see the farm operating, to experience that cohesiveness in the food supply chain.”

It's safe to say that Raymond enjoys his job. “I love getting to work all day with friends and family. It's a close-knit team. And I love being able to take something the earth produces, grass and turn it into an amazing, food product that's delicious, and healthy and provides an amazing livelihood for 20 different employees.”

Little Qualicum Cheeseworks

403 Lowry's Rd., Parksville, B.C.

morningstarfarm.ca | 250.954.3931 | @littlequalicumcheeseworks



The Fraser Valley

In the Fraser Valley, another artisan cheesemaker is busy at work. Friends of the Gourlay's, Golden Ears Cheesecrafters have been in operation since 2011. Sisters Emma Jane Davison

and Jenna Bock have a rich family tradition of farming as the fifth generation living on the same farmland, close to the Golden Ears provincial park.

Producing 300 to 600 kilograms of cheese per week in their 7,000 square-foot space, they are classified as a small dairy-processing facility. Inside the Maple Ridge farm shop, customers can watch cheese being made through a large window. “The window really provides a great visual story for our guests. We just added a bar top and stools so you can sit for a while, have a meal from our restaurant and appreciate the hard work that goes into making cheese by hand,” Davison says.

“We get a lot of questions when people see something that they don't recognize and it allows us to start a great dialogue and an impromptu lesson on cheese-making. For instance, “Cheddar has a special technique that takes up much more time and physical labour than most hard cheeses. One wheel of our four-year Cheddar has been flipped over approximately 228 times by hand.”

They partner with local wineries offering 'taster packs' of pre-cut cheese to purchase and host multiple events in collaboration with B.C. wineries throughout the summer.

At home, Davison keeps her wine and cheese pairings classic and simple. “My go-to is a sparkling brut with a ripe brie and baguette.”

Golden Ears Cheesecrafters

22270 128 Ave., Maple Ridge, B.C.

cheesecrafters.ca | 604.467.0004 | [@goldenearscheesecrafters](https://www.instagram.com/goldenearscheesecrafters)

Drive an hour East of Golden Ears and you'll find Farm House Natural Cheeses. The farm is one of only two places in Canada that makes cheddar with the traditional clothbound method — and that's not their only unique cheese offering.

Their Gruyere-style cheese called “Heidi” is only made during the summer, while their cows graze on fresh grass. It's then aged for a minimum of one year.

Emily Elizabeth Billon has been making cheese here since 2014 and likes to pair that a slice of Heidi with a locally made Pinot Gris. The Farm House makes an average of 1400 kilograms of cheese a month, including 14 varieties of cow and 12 varieties of goat cheese.

Billon credits the region with providing the natural ingredients to craft great cheese. “We are very truly blessed to be making cheese in the Fraser Valley. It is so lush here.” She also has a great tip for people wondering how to choose the best cheese-and-wine pairing. “A good rule of thumb is to start off experimenting with wine and cheese from the same region. It is so easy to find a favourite and get hooked.”

The Farm House Natural Cheeses

5634 McCallum Rd., Agassiz, B.C.

farmhousecheeses.com | 1.877.496.8741 | @farmhousecheeses