



The rack of lamb at the Sonora Room at Burrowing Owl Estate Winery will have you doubling back on Black Sage Road for supper. *DAMIAN MISCHKINIS*

THE RHÔNISH ROAD

Judging by the aromas in the air and the wines on your palate, you would imagine the Okanagan's Black Sage Road leads directly to the south of France, writes *Joanne Sasvari*.

Sage, of course. Rosemary. Lavender. Sun-baked stone. A hint of pine. And is that wild rose?

In the south of France, they call this bouquet of aromas "garrigue." It's the region's signature fragrance, a miasma of essential oils released by wild scrub in the baking sun. It's in the air, the food, that souvenir jar of herbes de Provence. You can even taste it in the wine, in the subtle floral-spice-herb notes that underpin so many Rhône Valley wines.

So why is it infusing a parking lot in the South Okanagan?

The Black Sage Road is a long way away from the Rhône Valley — more than 8,000 kilometres — but just at this moment, it seems so much closer.

It could be the way the setting sun gives the bluffs of Black Sage Bench the same rosy hue as Paul Cézanne's beloved Montagne Sainte Victoire. It could be the hot, desert-like air or the laid-back lifestyle, the cyclists pedalling by or the passionately local food scene.

Then again, it could just be the wine.

Although every grape from Bordeaux's Semillon to South Africa's Pinotage is grown along here, perhaps none does as well as Syrah, the plum-and-pepper-flavoured black grape of the Rhône, as well as its paler Rhône cousins Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne.

And that's why we're here, travelling along the scenic Black Sage Road, and tasting all the good things along the way.

The road — call it the Rhônish road, if you will — is only 14 kilometres long, running up the sandy-soiled Black Sage Bench on the eastern side of the Okanagan Valley from just north of Osoyoos to Oliver. Days are long, hot and sunny here, nights cool and refreshing. All of this is ideal for producing red wines, especially Syrah.

There are more than a dozen wineries and even more vineyards along the road. Here are just a few essential stops along the way.

BURROWING OWL ESTATE WINERY AND SONORA ROOM

Right around the Orchard Hills Estate Cidery and Fruit Market on Hwy 97, we turn onto Road 22. The road twists and turns as it travels over a rickety single-lane bridge and past a turtle crossing, then suddenly veers left and becomes Black Sage Road.

One of the first wineries we come to is Burrowing Owl (burrowingowlwine.ca). Named for the endangered local owl that nests underground, Burrowing Owl not only produces a terrific lineup of bold, full-bodied wines, including a luscious Syrah, but its Sonora Room was one of the first winery restaurants in the valley and a leader in defining Okanagan



MUSHROOM VELOUTÉ

Recipe by Chef Damian Mischkinis of Sonora Room at Burrowing Owl Estate Winery.

Makes: 4 servings

- 3 tbsp (42 g) unsalted butter
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 medium onion, peeled and sliced fine
- 3 cups (220 g) mushrooms, preferably a mix of oyster and crimini, roughly chopped
- 3 oz (95 mL) white wine
- 3 sprigs thyme
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 1 cup (250 mL) whole milk
- ½ cup (125 mL) heavy cream (36 per cent butterfat)
- ⅔ cup (150 mL) vegetable stock
- Salt and pepper to taste

1. Melt the butter in a medium-sized pot over medium heat. Add

wine country cuisine.

Today it's chef Damian Mischkinis in the kitchen, making the most of local ingredients such as the Arctic char farmed just up the road, and apples, peaches, tomatoes and squash from farms throughout the valley. Note to self: We'll be back for dinner.

PLATINUM BENCH ESTATE & ARTISAN BREAD CO.

Just a little bit up the way, we come to Platinum Bench (platinumbench.com). We sample the honey-and-peach-flavoured Chardonnay-Viognier blend, as well as the Syrah, which is full of dark fruit and spice. But we're really here for the bread.

Master baker (and co-owner) Fiona Duncan makes her flavourful artisan loaves on site from a sourdough starter, her recipes designed to pair perfectly with wine. Think bread with double cream brie and pear preserve baked right in the dough. Deliciously decadent.

We grab an Asiago cheese epi, still warm from the oven, and it's gone before we reach the end of the driveway.

BLACK HILLS ESTATE WINERY

We're still a little peckish, but no matter, we're heading to Black

the onions and garlic, and sweat until soft and translucent.

2. Add mushrooms and continue to cook for 5 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until they are soft and have released most of their liquid.

3. Add herbs and white wine and cook until liquid is reduced by about half, about 10 minutes.

4. Add milk, cream and stock. Bring to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes until all ingredients are tender. Season with salt and pepper to taste, then purée in blender (or use an immersion blender) until sinfully smooth.

5. Return to heat and rewarm. Divide between four bowls and serve with brioche croutons and, if you like, crisp prosciutto.

Hills next and all will be fine (blackhillswinery.com).

Black Hills offers one of the most glamorous wine experiences in the valley. Actor/director Jason Priestley is a co-owner and tastings are led by "wine evangelists" in sexy cabanas around a swimming pool.

It also produces the celebrated Bordeaux blend Nota Bene, which inevitably sells out within days, if not hours, of its release.

Luckily for us, their Syrah is less well known, so we can still get our hands on some. All plum and pepper, it is a classic example of what Okanagan Syrah can be. It also goes surprisingly well with pizza, which is a good thing, as that's what's on the menu.

All summer, the mobile Vineyard Kitchen dishes out salads, charcuterie and pizzas, like the harvest flatbread topped with goat cheese, roasted garlic, shaved zucchini and sage leaves. Poolside wine and pizza? We may never leave.

CHURCH & STATE WINES

Next we're on to Church & State for a little palate cleanser (churchandstatewines.com).

The winery is best known for big, award-winning reds (it's been named producer of Canada's Best

IF YOU GO

Staying there: Burrowing Owl Estate Winery has a handful of luxurious guest rooms (burrowingowlwine.ca), but if they're booked, check into the Watermark Beach Resort just down the road (watermarkbeachresort.com) in Osoyoos.

Dining there: On Black Sage Road, try the terrific Sonora Room at Burrowing Owl or the seasonal Vineyard Kitchen at Black Hills Estate Winery (blackhillswinery.com).

Across Hwy 97 on the Golden Mile, Miradoro Restaurant at Tinhorn Creek serves up exceptional food and even better views of the Black Sage Bench (tinhorn.com/Restaurant).

Being responsible there: OK Wine Shuttle offers a dinner shuttle service from Osoyoos hotels to the winery restaurants of the South Okanagan for about half the price of a taxi (okwineshuttle.ca).

For more information: Visit oliverosoyoos.com or HelloBC.com to plan your trip.

Red Wine five times since 2009), but we're here for the Trebelle, a classic Rhône white blend of Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier.

We love its lush mouth feel, its stone fruit, floral and marzipan aromas, and its vibrant citrus flavours. These are grapes that can be flat and flabby, but here in the Okanagan, they are filled with zingy acidity that makes them pair beautifully with food. Besides, at only \$22, the Trebelle is a total steal.

LE VIEUX PIN

Finally, we swing by Le Vieux Pin, the home of the most Rhônish wines in the valley (levieuxpin.ca).

Winemaker Severine Pinte produces a gorgeous Roussanne-Marsanne-Viognier blend called Ava that is all lush aromatics and delicate balance.

She also produces not one but three styles of Syrah: the delicately floral Cuvée Violette; the dark, savoury Cuvée Classique, which whisks you straight to the Northern Rhône; and the complex, perfectly balanced powerhouse Equinoxe. We are unable to resist their lure.

And then, there it is.

As we load our wine in the car, the breeze picks up, whiffing down the Black Sage Road, bringing with it the aromas of sage and lavender, rosemary and sun-baked stone. Perhaps it's wafted all the way from France. Or perhaps it's just the native garrigue of the Okanagan Valley, the perfume of the Rhônish road.