

# FOLLOWING

## *Vernon's Culinary Trail*

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

DAVISON ORCHARDS

THIS PHOTO Overlooking Vernon.





WHERE ON EARTH

## When I came in search of food experiences in British Columbia's North Okanagan Valley, I didn't expect to find myself HERE.

PINE FORESTS tumble down the Monashee mountains and cottonwoods throw shadows over the canoe, as I float with seven other paddlers down the Shuswap River. Other shadows flit below the water: Chinook and Sockeye salmon returning to their birthplace to spawn. A Bald Eagle whistles from a tall snag, but before I can locate his partner, my guide, Charles Ruechel, sounds *his* call to stroke hard on my side of the canoe. By the time we clear the 'sweeper' — a tree laid low over the water — we've left the eagle behind. No matter. Minutes later, another eagle splits the October sky.

Arguably, the culinary history of this area *begins* with the salmon, which have sustained the Spltasin First Nations here for thousands of years. But we haven't come to fish. Charles' mission is bigger than that: to connect us — and all of his **ELEMENTS Adventure** clients — personally to Mother Nature, for our wellbeing and for hers, too. With each backcountry story, each wild treasure observed, his passion grows more palpable — and more than a little contagious.

While my adventure with Charles seems an unlikely start to my culinary exploration here, he's an ideal usher into the food community. He grew up on a local organic sheep and cattle ranch; co-managed it for ten years. He lives in an orchard just outside the city of Vernon. He leads wild mushroom hunting

tours in the fall. Sadly, I've missed the window for mushroom foraging. So I launch my own food hunting trip on the streets of Vernon — and discover that Charles' deep appreciation for Nature's gifts is a common affliction.

Case in point are the folks at **Planet Bee** honey farm and meadery. They welcome me as I step into the shop, and offer to tell me about the bees in the display hive, if I'm so inclined. I'm soon embroiled in the intricacies of bee society, where hardworking females rule (the males are kicked out once their reproductive duty is done), procreation is rife with adaptation (after just one mating season, the queen can lay eggs for three to five years), and the importance of individual contributions to the success of the whole reaches its greatest expression.

It's fascinating and heady stuff — and warrants a long pause at the tasting bars for two dozen honey samples and five flavours of mead. The blueberry mead tempts with distinct tannins and complexity, but I scoop a jar of *Okanagan Gold* honey instead — a once-every-few-years variety that occurs when bees include a bit of clover along with their typical multi-floral foraging.

Around the corner lies another family's business, with roots so deep that the road is named after them. **Davison Orchards** has farmed these slopes since 1933; growing just apples at first, then

tomatoes, peppers, and — judging by the overflowing bins — pumpkins and all manner of squash. The faux country village is a taster's dream, with scores of jams and salsas, fruit butters and pickles, while the 1944 farmhouse dubbed *Auntie May's Deep Dish Cafe* serves handmade fruit pies along with the wide valley view. I've no time to take the orchard tour. But as I make a difficult choice between maple pumpkin scones and the signature apple pie, I learn there really was an Auntie May: the family matriarch came as a young bride from England, and ran the orchard with her teenaged nephew after her husband passed away.

Vernon was in the throes of the Great Depression when May Davison arrived in the valley. But the city was founded on boom times during the Cariboo gold rush, and the next stop on the tasting trail boasts strong ties to those early days — and to an enterprising man named Francis Jones Barnard.

Seems Barnard saw a niche in the 1860s for packing mail in and out of the goldfields. He landed the government postal contract and created the Barnard Express, a wildly successful company that provided stage service throughout the BC interior. At its peak, the company rivalled Wells Fargo in size, and to power all those wagons, Barnard built a 6000-acre horse operation called the BX Ranch. Technology marched onward; with rail and auto came the stagecoach's»



SERVES 8

## BC Harvest Salad

FROM LEAH DAVISON of Davison Orchards comes this robust salad featuring harvest fruits, seeds, and greens. Leah likes kale for its resistance to wilting once it's dressed — no need to toss this salad at the last minute when you're trying to get everything on the table.

**Kale (green or purple)** 1 small bunch

**Honeycrisp Apples** 2

**Firm Ripe Pears** 2

**Pumpkin Seeds** ½ cup

**Dried Cranberries** ½ cup

**Apple Juice** ¼ cup

**Olive Oil** 2 Tbs

**White Vinegar** 2 Tbs

**Salt** ¼ tsp

**Sugar** ¼ tsp

- 1 COMBINE** apple juice, olive oil, white vinegar, salt and sugar in a small container with a tight-fitting lid and shake well. Set aside.
- 2 WASH** and chop kale into bite-sized pieces and add to a large serving bowl.
- 3 TOP** with sliced apples, sliced pears, pumpkin seeds and cranberries.
- 4 DRIZZLE** with half the salad dressing and toss gently. Add more salad dressing to taste, saving the remainder for another time.

«demise. BX Ranch began to be parcelled off, and on one of those parcels the Dobernigg family launched its three-generation stewardship of a 30-acre orchard.

Fast forward to the 21st century, when something of Barnard's entrepreneurial spirit must have kindled Dave and Melissa Dobernigg's decision to graft heirloom cider apples onto their Golden Delicious trees. But since the 2014 opening of the **BX Press Cidery**, the accolades haven't stopped for their crisp, dry brews fermented with local yeasts and hops. The ciders sell out every season despite production doubling every year. Melissa was named one of Greater Vernon's Top 20 Under 40. The cidery captures the BX heydays with labels like *The Prospector* (their flagship English-style brew) and the dry-hopped *CrackWhip*. While I yearn for the whisky-barrel-oaked *Dufferin*, I'm lucky to score a bottle of the tart and tasty *Cranberry Cinnamon*, one of BX Press' seasonal botanicals.

The facades of downtown Vernon also capture the tracks of local history — and have yet to be firmly gentrified. Here, an Art Deco theatre features this year's Oscar contenders; a Chicago brick-and-corniced former hardware store touts antique decor. Seventies architecture makes multiple appearances among the restored boomtown storefronts. I lose myself in the well-stocked **Practical Kitchen** store; breathe the herbal bouquet of **Teasentials**; ponder optimum pairings of olive oils and balsamic vinegars in the **Olive Us** tasting room. A dash into Vernon's own organic grocery chain, **Nature's Fare**, yields wedges of raw-milk *Continental Blue* from local **Terroir Cheese** and a creamy brie-style *formaggella* from nearby **Bella Stella**.

Popular mainstreet restaurants like **The Curry Pot**, **Bamboo Beach**, **Kawakubo**, and **Los Huesos** speak to waves of migration to the valley. Though the aromas and chatter leaking from their doorways lure me to other latitudes, I'm questing for local and seasonal — and I find it in the art-filled heart of **Midtown Bistro**. Here the headliners are the Caesar cocktails crowned with cheeseburger sliders. The real story, however, is in the details: the seasoned glass-rimmer from Olive Us across the street, the cheese slices from **Village Cheese** up the road, the buns from **Sweet Caroline's** across town. A menu of beautifully rendered comfort food changes with what's on deck at the Farmers' Market.

Dedication to craft and community touch everything here, from the friendly-but-perfect service to the live Friday night local music sessions. It's a place where afternoon conversations are thoughtful and interesting and the server looks at me like I might be, too.

Plumbing Vernon's downtown dining scene requires several expeditions. For a hearty breakfast of Eggs Benny or a Mexican Skillet, I head early to the bus station to beat the locals and travellers packing cozy **EATology** from 6:30 am to its 3:00 pm closing.»





DAVIS ON ORCHARDS



VERNON'S CULINARY TRAIL

FOOD TRAIL

CANADA

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP LEFT Marten Brew Pub & Grill; Picking Pumpkins; Downtown Vernon; Mexican Skillet breakfast at EATology; Paddling with ELEMENTS Adventure Company; Main street, Vernon; Doughnuts, Ratio Coffee and Pastry.



ELEMENTS ADVENTURE COMPANY







SERVES 6

## Apple Baked Squash

*THIS SIMPLE SIDE dish is a Thanksgiving standard in the Davison household. Prepare it in the microwave to save valuable oven space for the rest of your meal.*

<b>Butternut Squash</b> ½ of one medium	<b>Butter</b> ⅓ cup, melted
<b>Apples</b> 2-3, sliced	<b>Salt</b> ½ tsp
<b>Brown Sugar</b> ⅓ cup	<b>Cinnamon</b> ¼-½ tsp

- CUT** squash into ½ inch slices. Arrange with apples in an 8" square glass dish.
- COMBINE** remaining ingredients until well blended. Pour over squash mixture.
- COVER** with plastic wrap and microwave for 20 minutes until soft (OR cover with foil and bake in a 350° oven for 45 minutes). Let stand 3 minutes before serving.

Do

Celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary at North Okanagan RespectFEST 2017, featuring a week's worth of events (September 18 to 24), including a multicultural food festival. [www.respectfest2017.com](http://www.respectfest2017.com)

Or make your own culinary discoveries with the VERNON TASTING TRAIL MAP [www.tourismvernon.com/en/eat-and-drink/vernon-tasting-trail](http://www.tourismvernon.com/en/eat-and-drink/vernon-tasting-trail)

Pick up a copy at the Vernon Visitor Centre — and get your free visitor's downtown parking pass while you're there.


«The chalkboard menu behind the counter boasts all-day breakfasts, homemade soups, creative salads, sandwiches and hot specials — and the perennially cheerful staff keep the crowds coming back.

For an ostensibly lighter bite, I join the queue at sunny **Ratio Coffee and Pastry**. Andrew McWilliam already ran a beloved downtown coffee cart when he decided to tap pastry chef Laurie Knuever for a sweet supplement to his fine roasted pour-over coffee. Their one-off Doughnut Day launched a veritable stampede — one that hasn't subsided since they set up shop together in the former CP Rail Station in 2015. Now Laurie's Galette Mondays give way to Éclair Tuesdays, Cake Wednesdays to Strudel Thursdays, and Fridays are legendary with doughnut artistry that belies its humble deep-fried origins.

Next door, Eric and Tanya Wisse have got their smoker going at **Station BBQ Smokehouse**, serving authentic Southern barbecue along with an array of house-made sauces. Barbecue aficionados give it a resounding thumbs-up, and the fork-tender beef brisket with *Afterburner* sauce converts even my cold Northern heart.

Another newish-kid-on-the-block dominates mainstreet's busiest corner. The glass-enclosed fermentation tanks at **Marten Brewing Company's Brew Pub & Grill** leave no doubt as to the priorities here. Taking my cue, I order a flight of the current tap offerings: a South German-style Jefe weizen, the *Oktoberfest-Marzen*, a punster's *Rye NOT Lager*, and *Lunkhead Lager*, a crowd-pleaser that's become a Marten standard.

Still, the pearl in Vernon's libations oyster may be **Okanagan Spirits Craft Distillery**, named Distiller of the Year at both the 2013 and 2015 World Spirits Awards. The distillery — which uses all-Okanagan fruit and grain — medalled in every one of its product categories in 2015, and its *Laird of Fintry* whisky became Canada's first single malt to win gold.

The Laird's not to be had when I visit the cavernous tasting room: this whisky sells only by lottery. Instead, I take a joyous junket through the absinthe and fruit brandies, and succumb to a rhubarb liqueur that's crisp and tart. In one of those curious connections of the alcohol-tainted brain, the liqueur's salmon blush reminds me of my Sockeye encounter on the Shuswap River — and I wonder where I've stashed the phone number for Charles Ruechel. There's still wild mushrooms to be found next fall. 

**CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT's** drive through the Rockies back to her Calgary home was deliciously fuelled by Davison's maple pumpkin scones. (She's saving the pie for next time). Read more of her work at [www.catherinevanbrunschot.com](http://www.catherinevanbrunschot.com)



**ELEMENTS Adventure Company**  
[www.elementsadventures.com](http://www.elementsadventures.com)

**Planet Bee Honey Farm/Honeymoon Mead**  
[www.planetbee.com](http://www.planetbee.com)

**Davison Orchards Country Village**  
[www.davisonorchards.ca](http://www.davisonorchards.ca)

**The BX Press Cidery and Orchard**  
[www.thebxpress.com](http://www.thebxpress.com)

**The Practical Kitchen**  
[www.goodgracious.ca](http://www.goodgracious.ca)

**Teassential**  
[www.teassential.ca](http://www.teassential.ca)

**Olive Us**  
[www.oliveussoils.com](http://www.oliveussoils.com)

**Nature's Fare Markets**  
[www.naturesfare.com](http://www.naturesfare.com)

**Terroir Cheese**  
[www.facebook.com/terroircheese](http://www.facebook.com/terroircheese)

**Bella Stella Cheese**  
[www.bellastellacheese.com](http://www.bellastellacheese.com)

**The Curry Pot**  
[www.indianrestaurantinvernonbc.ca](http://www.indianrestaurantinvernonbc.ca)

**Bamboo Beach Fusion Grille**  
[www.facebook.com/BambooBeachFusionGrille](http://www.facebook.com/BambooBeachFusionGrille)

**Kawakubo Sushi & Japanese Restaurant**  
[www.kawakubo-vernon.com](http://www.kawakubo-vernon.com)

**Los Huesos Mexican Restaurant**  
[www.loshuesosrestaurant.com](http://www.loshuesosrestaurant.com)

**Midtown Bistro**  
[www.midtownbistro.ca](http://www.midtownbistro.ca)

**The Village Cheese Co.**  
[www.facebook.com/thevillagecheese](http://www.facebook.com/thevillagecheese)

**Sweet Caroline's Bakery**  
[www.sweetcarolinesbakery.ca](http://www.sweetcarolinesbakery.ca)

**EATology**  
[www.facebook.com/eatologyvernon](http://www.facebook.com/eatologyvernon)

**Ratio Coffee and Pastry**  
[www.ratiocoffee.ca](http://www.ratiocoffee.ca)

**Station BBQ / Smokehouse**  
[www.stationbbq.com](http://www.stationbbq.com)

**Marten Brewing Company Brew Pub & Grill**  
[www.martenbrewpub.com](http://www.martenbrewpub.com)

**Okanagan Spirits Craft Distillery**  
[www.okanaganspirits.com](http://www.okanaganspirits.com)



ALBERTA CUISINE

**SERVES 1**

## Masala Chai Sour

*DRAWING HER INSPIRATION* from the chai sellers she met in India, writer/editor Shelley Wood created this cocktail for her in-laws, Patricia and Tony Dyck of Okanagan Spirits, after a trip through Rajasthan and Kerala. She recommends tasting your drink before adding bitters — you might not need them if your tea syrup is sufficiently bitter.

**Okanagan Spirits Rye Whisky** 2 oz

**Fresh Lemon Juice** 1 oz

**Masala Simple Syrup** 2/3 oz

**Egg White** 1

**Bitters**<sup>1</sup> to taste

- SHAKE** all ingredients in an ice-filled cocktail shaker until the egg white emulsifies.
- STRAIN** into glass. Garnish with a dried lemon disk and the slightest dash of cinnamon.

<sup>1</sup> Shelley recommends *Bittered Sling LEM Marrakech* or *Moondog*.

### Masala Simple Syrup

**Water** 2 cups

**Sugar** 2 cups

**Teabags** 3<sup>1</sup>

**Cinnamon Stick** 1

**Ginger** 2" piece, peeled, chopped

**Cardamom Pods** 1 Tbs, crushed, shelled

- COMBINE** ingredients in a pot and boil together for half an hour. Remove from heat and let cool.
- ALLOW** syrup to steep with tea/spices from one hour (minimum) to 3 days (maximum), according to taste. Strain before using. Store in refrigerator.

<sup>1</sup> Or 3 Tbs loose tea (*Irish Breakfast* works well).