

In
Search of
Gulf Island Wines

By Diane Selkirk

We stepped out on deck just after the ferry sailed clear of the Tsawwassen terminal. Standing close together, braced against the wind, we admired the stars. Behind us, Vancouver's lights were beginning to fade and ahead of us, B.C.'s Gulf Islands were low shadows. Our island wine exploration was about to begin. ▶

Morning Bay Vineyard

ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

Mainland
B.C.

Gabriola



Valdes

Thetis

Galiano

*Salt
Spring*

Mayne

Garry Oaks
Vineyard

Salt Spring
Vineyards

Morning Bay
Vineyard

Saturna

Saturna Island
Family Estate Winery

Penders

Vancouver
Island

Scale: 1.75" = 7.5 miles

SARAH BURGLEY ILLUSTRATION

In 1792, when Captain George Vancouver first sighted the Gulf Islands off mainland B.C.'s coast, he may have been confused by the geography, but this didn't stop him from claiming the islands for the British Crown.

It's now apparent to anyone who checks a map that the Gulf Islands aren't located in a gulf. Instead, the 20 or so islands are clustered against the sheltered southeastern coast of Vancouver Island and are bordered by the Georgia Strait. With their surprisingly balmy climates, the Gulf Islands are a favorite retreat for outdoor adventurers and, increasingly, wine lovers.

After two hours, our ferry docked at Long Harbour on Salt Spring Island. A few minutes later, the staff at the venerable Hastings House Country House Hotel showed us to our suite.

English transplant Warren Hastings built Hastings House in 1940, replicating his 11th-century Tudor-style home in Sussex. "He was a yacht designer, like you," I informed Evan, my slumbering husband, as I watched the sun rise over Ganges Harbour the next morning. "They've left us a basket with yummy-looking muffins. Would you like the raspberry one?" I asked, trying to wake him.

I munched on baked goods, poked my way through the room's charming built-ins, played a couple of the CDs by local musicians, and admired the view of the gardens and harbor. Finally I began to nibble at Evan's muffin. "You're going to miss out on the market and your muffin if you don't wake up," I said.

It's a five-minute walk from Hastings House to the Salt Spring Saturday Market in Ganges village. The market gives shoppers access to a wide range of farmers and artisans who sell only what they can make, bake, or grow, from hand-forged kitchen knives to French pastries.

Sampling and shopping my way from stall to stall, I was remarking on the heady aroma of a tomato to a stranger when I noticed I had lost Evan. So

Grab a picnic for your island lunch at the Salt Spring Saturday Market

I made my way back past organic squash, heritage apples, homemade bread, and preserves until I found him sampling David Wood's goat cheese with truffles. "Perfect for a picnic," the vendor pointed out.

While Evan chose bread to go with the cheese and talked organic peppers with Michael Ableman of Foxglove Farm, I admired the work of silversmith Antony Marcano of Fresh Silver. A silver relief map of Vancouver Island—my family's home for many generations—caught my eye. "It's completely accurate," Marcano said of the two-inch pendant. "You could navigate a boat by it."

Picnic in hand, we set off for Ruckle Provincial Park overlooking Swanson Channel, where we ate lunch while watching a family of river otters at play. Despite the lovely setting, it was soon time to move on. There were studios and farms and, most importantly, Salt Spring Vineyards and Garry Oaks Winery still to visit.

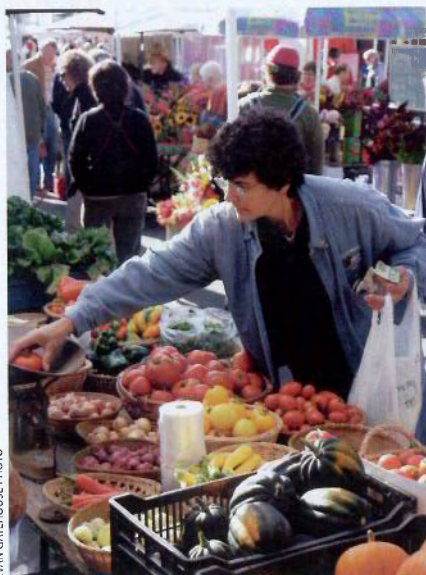
Grape-growing is relatively new to the Gulf Islands. Western B.C.'s first vines were planted on Vancouver Island, in

nearby Duncan, in the 1980s; commercial sales didn't really begin until the late 1990s. But today business is booming and the awards are sailing in. Currently there are seven wineries and about 100 acres planted to grapes on five of the Gulf Islands.

The Salt Spring and Garry Oaks wineries are practically adjacent, but visiting these neighbors makes it clear how truly individual the Gulf Island vineyards are. All the wineries are working with similar climatic conditions, grape varieties, and watering restrictions (most use some method of rain-fed irrigation ponds—not their scarce island water supply.) And all of them practice a combination of sustainable and organic



EVAN GATEHOUSE PHOTO



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

(Clockwise from top)
Salt Spring Vineyards wines;
picnicking at
Salt Spring Vineyards;
fresh fare at the Salt Spring
Saturday Market.

EVAN GATEHOUSE PHOTO

methods. But none of the wineries produces a wine that tastes like any other.

We stopped in at **Salt Spring Vineyards** first. It wasn't our first visit; owners Bill and Jan Harkley run a charming B&B on the premises. This time the Harkleys were away and staffer Colleen Bowen was in the busy tasting room, helping a group of tourists taste their way through the wines, pairing each wine with a local cheese.

A few of the wines, including the yummy "Apple Pie" made from organic Salt Spring apples, were already sold out. (We encountered this at all the vineyards, as production is not yet keeping pace with demand.) But the 2006 Millotage was available. A combination of estate Leon Millot and Maréchal Foch, it carried a big fruity flavor. There was also a 2006 Pinot Blanc; made with grapes grown on Salt Spring Island and Vancouver Island's Saanich Peninsula, it smelled of kiwi and had a delicate tropical flavor.

Bowen said the year's real hit was the sparkling 2005 Morning Star, which is blended from Saanich Pinot Noir and estate Chardonnay. I commented to Evan that if we'd had a bottle of this lively wine on our picnic, we might still be watching the otters.

Outside the pretty tasting room, the

vines laden with ripening grapes stretched down to the road. The ocean sparkled in the distance and a couple of Indian Runner ducks swam in the pond. I went for a wander through the fields, hoping to run into winemaker Paul Troop. Troop, who has been making wine for more than 30 years, says he enjoys experimenting with the grapes, trying to develop varietals that thrive in the coastal region. He says his goal "isn't to make a wine that tastes like it came from anywhere—but one that tastes only of Salt Spring."

From the casual friendliness of Salt Spring Vineyards, we made our way to the elegance of **Garry Oaks Winery**. Owners Elaine Kozak and Marcel Mercier do every-

thing at the winery and Kozak left her culling work to walk us through the terraced vines. Stopping to admire the ocean view and the site's mature Garry oak trees, Kozak explained how they chose the rootstocks and grape varieties that would best flourish in the relatively cool climate. "Coastal grapes ripen less predictably than in other regions," she noted. "We need to work with what we get. Sometimes we need to get creative."

In the wine shop Kozak poured and explained that it was just nine years ago that she and Mercier left the corporate world and started the winery. The 2006 Pinot Gris was first up. The dry white wine was light and fresh with hints of pear and citrus. She said the 2006 Pinot Gris is a blend ▶

Winery Contacts

It's always best to call ahead for current tasting room hours. To learn more about wine touring in the Gulf Islands (and on Vancouver Island), contact the Wine Islands Vintners Association at wineislands.ca.

ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO



Salt Spring Vineyards

151 Lee Road, Salt Spring Island, B.C.
250-653-9463, saltspringvineyards.com

Garry Oaks Winery

1880 Fulford-Ganges Road, Salt Spring Island, B.C.
250-653-4687, garryoakswinery.com

Morning Bay Vineyard

6621 Harbour Hill Drive, Pender Island, B.C.
250-629-8351, morningbay.ca

Saturna Island Family Estate Winery

8 Quarry Road, Saturna Island, B.C.
250-539-5139, saturnavineyards.com



EVAN GATEHOUSE PHOTO

Elaine Kozak, co-owner of Garry Oaks Winery. (Inset) Garry Oaks's view extends to the Gulf waters.

Where to Stay

Hastings House Country House Hotel

Suites and cottages range from \$295CDN to \$900CDN.

160 Upper Ganges Road
Salt Spring Island, B.C.
800-661-9255 or 250-537-2362
hastingshouse.com

Poets Cove Resort and Spa

Rooms, cottages, and villas range from \$175CDN to \$600CDN. Poets Cove offers pre-arranged tours of nearby wineries, art galleries, and Salt Spring Saturday Market.

9801 Spalding Road
South Pender Island, B.C.
888-512-7638 or 250-629-2100
poetscove.com

Artisans and Galleries

Salt Spring Saturday Market

8:30am–3:30pm Saturdays, Starting March 22
saltspringmarket.com

Antony Marcano – Fresh Silver

freshsilver.com

Gwen's Fine Arts

4614 Mate Road, Pender Island, B.C.
250-629-6647, gwensnativecollectibles.com

Renaissance Gallery

3302 Port Washington Road, Pender Island, B.C.
250-629-3070

BC Ferries

Reservations are recommended for some of the Gulf Island runs. For details, click bcferries.com or call 888-223-3779.



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

Poets Cove Resort and Spa can help you organize your island wine excursions.

of 60% barrel-aged and 40% tank-aged, but that she was planning to barrel age all of 2007's reduced yield, saying, "I like it better. The barrel gives it a creamier feel."

The estate-grown 2005 Pinot Noir (aged in Garry oak and French oak barrels), with a scent of cherries and a fruity, smoky finish, made me ask if it was really true that they were sold out of absolutely everything. Kozak told us the vineyard produces about 1,700 cases a year and between farm-gate sales and supplying regional restaurants, "everything goes."

That evening, in Hastings House's intimate dining room, with the memory of Garry Oaks' Pinots still lingering, I ordered the chef's menu and paired it with a Garry Oaks Pinot Gris. Chef Marcel Kauer put together a delicious meal that seemed based on highlights from the Saturday market, starting with a salad of Bright Farm tomato and Moonstruck feta cheese salad, and progressing to oysters with shaved fennel and wild arctic char with a chanterelle mushroom risotto.

The next morning we caught the early ferry so we could tour two more islands—Pender and Saturna.

Pender Island's attractions include far more than wine. We made a point of stopping at Gwen's Fine Arts at Driftwood Centre. Coast Salish, Nootka, and other First Nations artists fill owner Gwen Davidson's beautiful shop with traditional and contemporary native art. The detailed carving on a copper bracelet, made by Val Lancaster of the Namgis Nation, impressed me and despite my plan not to buy anything, I wore the bracelet out of the store.

On Pender you'll also find Renaissance Gallery, an unexpected gem specializing in craft jewelry, antiques, and other finds, including roughly 40 Salvador Dalis. "We're the kind of shop you might find in a big city," says co-owner Jan Huk. "But we're unique for a small island."

He and his wife, Milada, greeted us like old friends when we arrived (it was my second visit) and showed us some of Milada's newest glass-bead jewelry. Jan's eyes glowed as he talked about his wife's creations. Evan caught the romance of the moment and gave me one of Milada and Jan's co-designed fusion mosaic pieces.

It was hard to say goodbye to the delightful Huks, but Keith Watt and Barbara Reid were waiting at **Morning Bay Vineyard**, on the north end of Pender Island. This is one of the newer Gulf wineries, and as we walked through the steeply terraced vineyards, Watt told us he had owned the land for quite a while before deciding to clear it for "winesteading."

"I was looking across the sound at Saturna's vineyard and thought, 'Why not?'" he recalled.

The waterfront location does have its



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

Saturna Island Family Estate Winery produces a substantial 12,000 cases a year.



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

The dock at Saturna Island is walking distance from Saturna Island Winery.

challenges. We could see that the grapes on the vines were less ripe than the ones we'd seen on Salt Spring Island, but Watt says he believes the climate can work for him. "The long season leads to a low-alcohol wine," he notes. "It tends to be crisp and food-friendly. And you can drink it all afternoon."

In the dramatic tasting room, which can be rented for events, Reid poured and talked. She explained that they've been working with consulting winemaker Tilman Hainle, a veteran of B.C.'s Okanagan region to the east. "His expertise lets us make the wines we like to drink," she said.

The 2006 Estate Bianco is Morning Bay's first release. A blend of Schönburger, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, and Riesling, it's light, crisp, and gently perfumed. The 2006 estate Gewürztraminer had a bright citrus flavor that would pair nicely with local seafood. Watt said one of Morning Bay's most popular wines is a rosé called Chiarretto (he proved the point when a local stopped in to buy a bottle). The 2006 Chiarretto is made from estate-grown Pinot Noir and has a smooth, light, fruity flavor.

After buying a bottle of Morning Bay's Bianco, we headed to the dock at Poets Cove Resort for a picturesque boat ride to Saturna Island. The tour takes visitors around South Pender and includes a ride out to visit a seal rookery, as well as

some up-close views of eagles and herons.

Saturna Island Family Estate Winery is the oldest in the Gulf Islands. The 60 acres of vines are producing enough Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Noir, and Merlot grapes to produce 12,000 cases of wine a year.

Manager Michael Vautour walked us through the vines, lamenting over the year's cool weather and his "discontented Merlot." Vautour said they work with consulting winemaker Daniel Lagna, formerly of Mission Hill Family Estate in the Okanagan, to get the most out of their unique microclimate, which is warmed by the sheer cliffs of south-facing Mount Warburton. As we walked, he pointed out a roaming herd of feral goats. "It's different here,"

he said wryly.

Back in the tasting room, Vautour suggested ordering from the winery's busy bistro before starting our tasting. With an extensive menu and exceptional views, the bistro is a favorite with locals and visiting boaters. I ordered a Mediterranean snack plate, then made my way through the wines. The Gewürztraminer, which I liked on a previous visit, was sold out. But the crisp 2006 Pinot Gris made a great choice for patio sipping. We also tried two Chardonnays. The 2006 unoaked was creamy-feeling and tasted of green apple, while the 2005 oaked version had a classic buttery finish. We also sampled two Pinot Noirs; the 2006 had a wonderful full-bodied feel with a cherry finish.

After relaxing on the patio, we took the boat back to Poets Cove, arriving in early evening. Settling into our pretty cottage, we watched the light as it shifted and changed over the water. I sorted through our wine purchases and decided that Morning Bay's Bianco would be the perfect hot tub wine. Glasses in hand, we watched the moon rise over the forest and toasted the bold "winesteaders" of the Gulf Islands.



Writer Diane Selkirk and her husband, photographer Evan Gatehouse, live in Vancouver, B.C.