

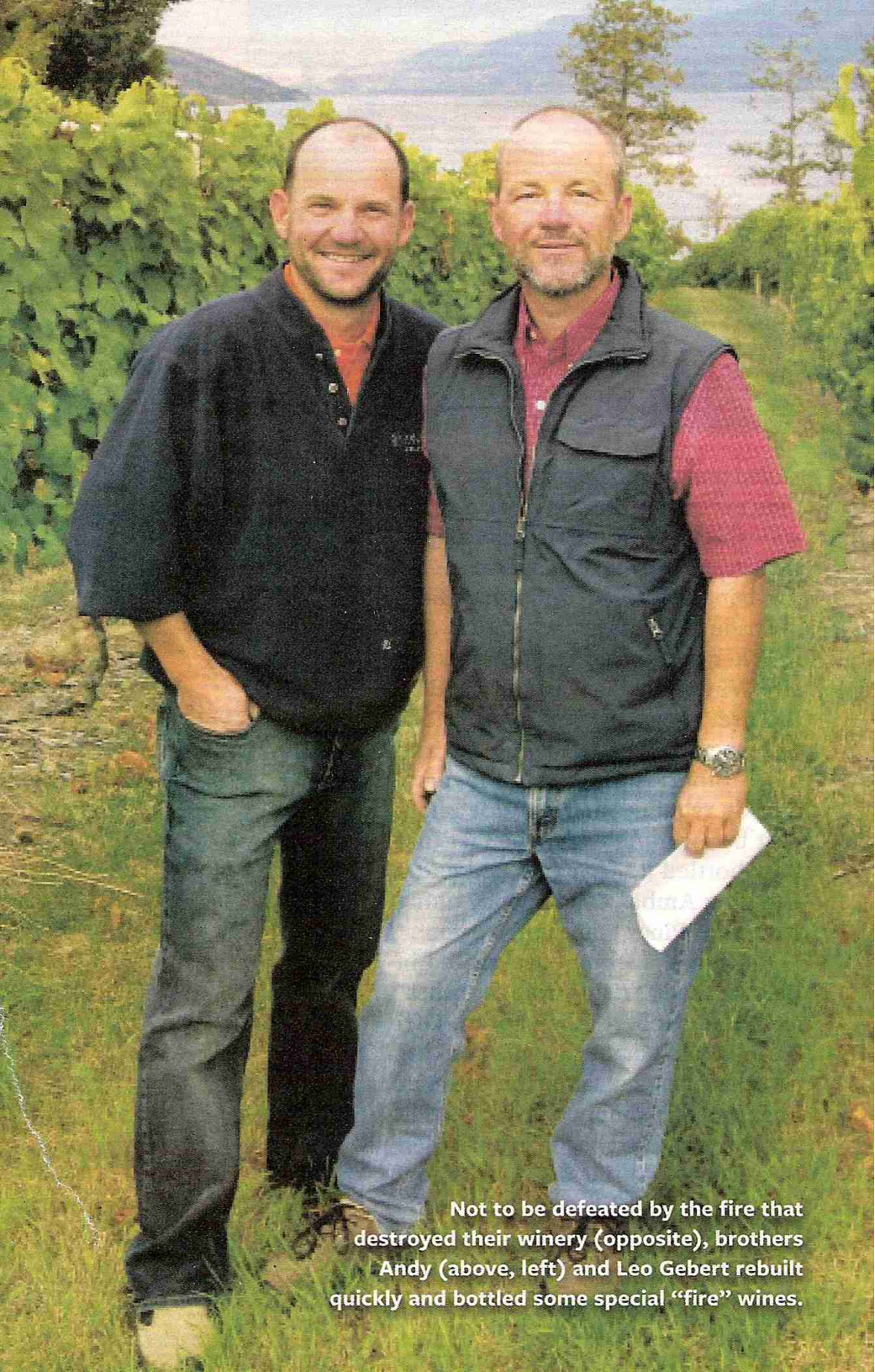
Kelowna Fires Back

Early on August 16, 2003, lightning struck Okanagan Mountain Park near Kelowna. Within hours, winds had whipped the flames into a firestorm that consumed over 25,000 hectares of forest and 239 homes.

BY DIANE SELKIRK

WMy family had planned a trip to Kelowna, a thriving agriculture-based city located on the shores of Okanagan Lake, for August 2003. We wanted to go wine tasting at the vineyards and then bicycle through the Myra Canyon, a section of the Kettle Valley Steam Railway high up the hills above. Instead, our trip was pre-empted by Mother Nature; rather than sipping Pinot Blanc and biking across old wooden trestles, we watched them burn on the evening TV news.

In 2008 we finally made the trip. We found that Kelowna's citizens had



Not to be defeated by the fire that destroyed their winery (opposite), brothers Andy (above, left) and Leo Gebert rebuilt quickly and bottled some special “fire” wines.



During the fire, and after: The Myra Canyon trestles, rebuilt to historical standards, are an integral part of a popular cycling trail.

pulled together to rebuild. In fact, they didn't seem to resent the fire and the widespread devastation it caused; Ed Kruger, a local tourism operator, said surviving was a matter of taking things in stride "and adapting."

When we visited St. Hubertus Estate Winery, which was destroyed by the fire, as was its grape crop, Leo Gebert said the same thing. He and his brother Andy, the co-owners, quickly rebuilt. Their attitude might best be exemplified by the fact that they bottled a Fireman's Red and a Glowing Amber Chardonnay along with their Pinot Blanc and icewine.

It seemed everyone we visited in Kelowna had a "rising from the ashes" anecdote. Gebert's neighbour, Ofri Barmor, told her story while showing us around her goat farm. The Barmors, from Israel, had only recently settled in Canada and had begun to build their artisan cheese business, Carmelis Goat Cheese, when the fire started.

"We had 90 goats and nowhere to go," says Barmor, whose family was caught off guard by their new home's



If You Go

**Tourism Kelowna
Visitor Info Centre**

1-800-663-4345
tourismkelowna.com

**Myra Canyon Trestle
Restoration Society**
myratrestles.com

Monashee Adventure Tours
1-888-76C-YCLE
monasheeadventuretours.com

St. Hubertus Estate Winery
1-800-989-WINE
st-hubertus.bc.ca

Carmelis Goat Cheese
250-764-9033
carmeliskoatcheese.com

“warm welcome.” Ofri’s husband, Ofer, called the local radio station for help—and the trucks and trailers of strangers were soon lined up to take the goats to safety.

Over some samples of creamy goat cheese and sumptuous gelato, Bar-mor described how, when the fire was put out, they brought the goats back. The barn and cheese shop were destroyed, and their house was damaged. “I don’t think we could have rebuilt if it wasn’t for the help we received,” she says.

Perhaps the most symbolic story

of the community’s pulling together is that of the restoration of the Myra Canyon trail, the most picturesque part of the Kettle Valley Steam Railway, which was completed in 1915. The 12-kilometre stretch through Myra Canyon, with its 18 trestles, attracted hikers and cyclists as soon as the rail line was decommissioned in 1978. But by the late 1980s, the trestles had deteriorated and a group of volunteers decided to secure them.

Ken Campbell, who’s been volunteering with the Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society since 1993, says that once the trestles were safe for visitors, about 50,000 people a year came. In January 2003, just seven months before the fire, Myra Canyon was designated a national historic site.

During the fire, firefighters made a heroic effort to save the trestles, but 12

of the 18 were eventually destroyed. Within days, unsolicited donations began arriving from residents and from around the world, including the U.K., Germany and the Netherlands. “There was this tremendous will to see the trestles rebuilt,” says Campbell. It took \$17.5 million and four years—the same time it took for that section of the railway to be built almost a century before.

The reopening of the trestles in June 2008 rekindled our interest in visiting the region. Driving up a mountain road, we reached the entrance to Myra Canyon. The fire-ravaged forest of spruce and ponderosa pine was still standing, but it was silver and black—monochromatic save for the vivid fall ground cover.

It was crisp and sunny when we set off on our bike ride with Kruger, the owner of Monashee Adventure Tours. As we rode, he pointed out details of the historic and modern trestle construction. At one point we stopped in the middle of a long trestle for the view: Stretching in front of us was a stark, fire-cleared panorama with Okanagan Lake sparkling far below.

“It’s actually more dramatic now, after the fire,” Kruger told us. We hadn’t seen how it looked before the forest burned, but it seemed fitting that the altered view included glimpses of Kelowna, the city whose residents cared deeply about Myra Canyon. ■

