

Destination / COWICHAN BAY

COWICHAN BAY AND VALLEY

A slow-living escape to marine heritage, food,
art and some of the finest wine in the province

BY MARIANNE SCOTT

W

E NOSED OUR way into a Cowichan Bay Marina on a glorious day, with the sun burning off twists of mist and creating undulating oval diamonds on the wavelets. The village looked enticing, with a dense jumble of character buildings, float homes and houses-on-stilts lining the coast.

Reaching this quaint town is relatively simple. Separation Point shelters Cowichan Bay somewhat, and whether you arrive from either the north or the south, you traverse Satellite Channel, bordering the east side of Salt Spring Island. Calculating the tides through this waterway will certainly help your speed as currents flow swiftly. Except for the marked Paley Rock and Musgrave Rock, there are no obstacles until you close in on Cowichan Bay marina; there you must wend your way carefully among the horde of boats anchored in the bay.

THE VILLAGE OF COWICHAN BAY distinguishes itself from other small communities by having joined an Italian-founded movement called Cittaslow, an organization inspired by the slow food movement. Cittaslow's goals include tempering a town's overall pace, preserving its character, focusing on high-quality local food and drink, while opposing "anywhere North America." That doesn't mean casting its heritage in concrete, but avoiding such franchises as McDonald's and KFC that make the town look like every other community.

The Cowichan area has adopted the slogan, "Slow Down, Savour Life." The village of Cowichan Bay's culture certainly focuses on local and handmade goods—all taking extensive time to prepare. We started with dessert first at The Original Udder Guys ice-cream dispensary. My husband, David, indulged in maple walnut and I enjoyed orange ice cream with chocolate bits. We caught owner Yves Muselle in the middle of producing several batches of ice cream. He told us that his basic ice cream recipe includes only three ingredients: milk,

sugar and cream. All made from scratch without artificial additives. "I've made at least 102 flavours," he said proudly. "I make special orders for restaurants and weddings. Like lemon-lavender. Liqueur-based ice cream for Christmas. And so on." The Udder Guys sells about 450 cones a day and a chalkboard inside the shop informed us 1,592,136 cones have been scooped since 2000, a number that grows daily.

Down the block, we found True Grain, with an old-fashioned bicycle bearing fat loaves of bread suspended above the entry. The scent of freshly baked bread tugs you through the front door. The bakery prepares handcrafted bread using organic, BC-grown grains without added sugar, oils or preservatives. They mill their own grain and bake fresh loaves daily—unsold baked goods are donated to food banks. Among other specialties, you can buy loaves of whole-grain spelt, cinnamon raisin, red-fife sourdough and whole-grain Khorasan. Pastries and cookies also entice. Owner Bruce Stewart, quoting Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*, says, "The flavour of bread

shared has no equal."

Next door, at Hilary's Cheese, another local mainstay, we tried to order a Ploughman's Lunch (choice of two meats, cheese, pickles, dried fruit and bread from True Grain). Alas, they were sold out so we settled for tasting local and international cheeses, complemented by excellent coffee. A guitar in a corner begs, "play me."

We munched crispy calamari at the Rock Cod Café, one of the village's most

popular restaurants. We could only have sampled all the other food dispensaries if we'd stayed in Cowichan Bay a week—places like the Cow Café with its excellent view of the harbour, Rob's Lighthouse where you can rub elbows with locals, the halibut tacos or roast beef yorkies at the Cowichan Bay Pub, The Vines' famous crepes, or the fine dining at the Masthead in the former Columbia Hotel, dating back to 1863. That building has a storied history: among other

trades, it served as inn and restaurant when travellers and traders followed the rutted wagon trail north. In the 1800s, the 50-kilometre trip from Victoria took days instead of today's hour-long drive. You can even eat at the Classic Marine chandlery located right in the middle of the strip—after shopping for needed boat parts or studying a marine catalogue, you can enjoy homemade clam chowder and kiwi pie.

Handmade is also on display at the

Mud Room Clayworks, where Colleen Underwood makes functional pottery, thereby marrying utility and art. Her mugs, bowls, platters, vases and cheerful teapots are useful and imaginative. The entry to her shop, enlivened by a horde of plants, is down the alley from True Grain.

For groceries, Pier 66 not only offers the basics, but I spied jars of pesto and other delicacies on the shelves. The store also sells beer, wine and spirits, and serves ▶



Cowichan Bay's Fisherman's wharf.

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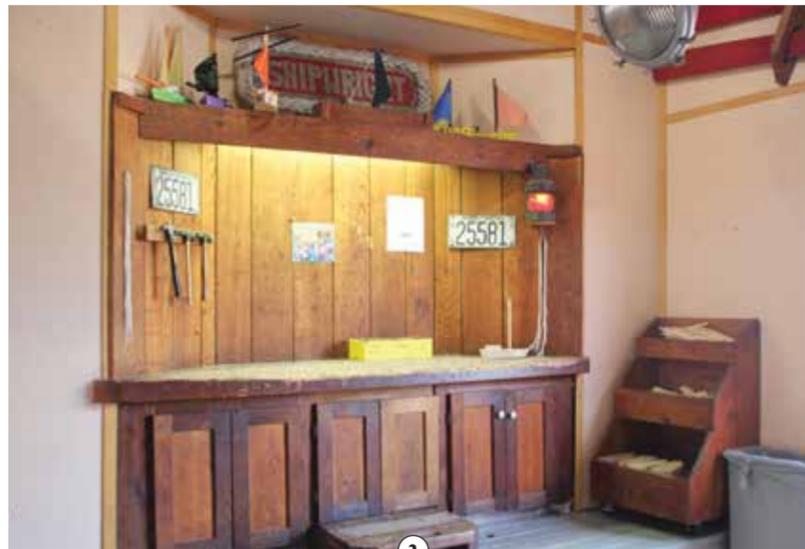


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Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre
1. Harvey George's fishboat carvings. 2. A model of Drake's Golden Hind. 3. The kids' corner.



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as post office.

A few paces further down the coastal emporiums, I met Laurie Arbuthnot, who creates her artisan fragrances like an alchemist in a cave—although her shop, Wild Coast Perfumery, is filled with light and scores of essence-filled bottles. “My Vancouver Island location is my inspiration,” she told me. “Memories of scent influence my plant-based perfumes. I harvest wild plants and use essential oil tinctures to create my botanical perfumes and colognes.”

Half a block further, we visited one of our treasured artists, Arthur Vickers. He and his wife, Jessica, welcomed us warmly in the spacious gallery. Arthur's work reveals his First Nation's roots and inspiration, but with a contemporary interpretation of his heritage. We'd always admired his carvings, serigraphs and paintings, but this time, we were introduced to his more recent invention of handcrafted, multi-layered, low-relief sculpting in 24k-gold-leaf on a black background. It's luminous and gorgeous.

THE COWICHAN MARITIME CENTRE is one of our favourite venues. In the museum's early section, excellent models of such iconic ships as Columbus' *Santa Maria* and Francis Drake's *Golden Hind* are presented. The other displays extend along a pier, culminating in a “Supercargo Pavillion” featuring 11 colourful and

precise carvings of traditional fishboats by T'sou-ke member Harvey George (PY February 2019). Along the pier's various pods, we viewed vintage outboards, historic photos, fallers' tools, and a kid station where they hammer out a wood project.

The Maritime Centre also offers workshops on such topics as clenchnail lapstrake boat building. Students come from as far away as China and Germany to learn these traditional wooden-boat building methods. The dinghy they construct is raffled off to support pier maintenance. Kids can also build a boat with wood donated by Timber West and take their handiwork home.

A FOODIE/WINE TOUR While visiting Cowichan Bay, we signed up for Vancouver Island Expeditions' “Taste

of Cowichan” tour, with visits to three wineries. We discovered why the Cowichan Valley is suited to wine production. Cowichan is named after the Indigenous word *Quw'utsum*, meaning “The Warm Land.” Surrounded by various mountains and hilly islands, the Valley is one of the warmest places on Vancouver Island and thus highly suitable for value-added agriculture—with vineyards growing into a popular destination for culinary travel.

Guide Brendan Milholm collected us by the Ocean Front Suites in a spiffy Mercedes van. Two others couples, hailing from Calgary and Seattle, shared the tour. Throughout the trip, I learned more of what I call “wine-speak,” that baroque vocabulary describing the taste of each bottle of wine produced.

Our first stop took place at the 50-acre Enrico Winery, where, from the

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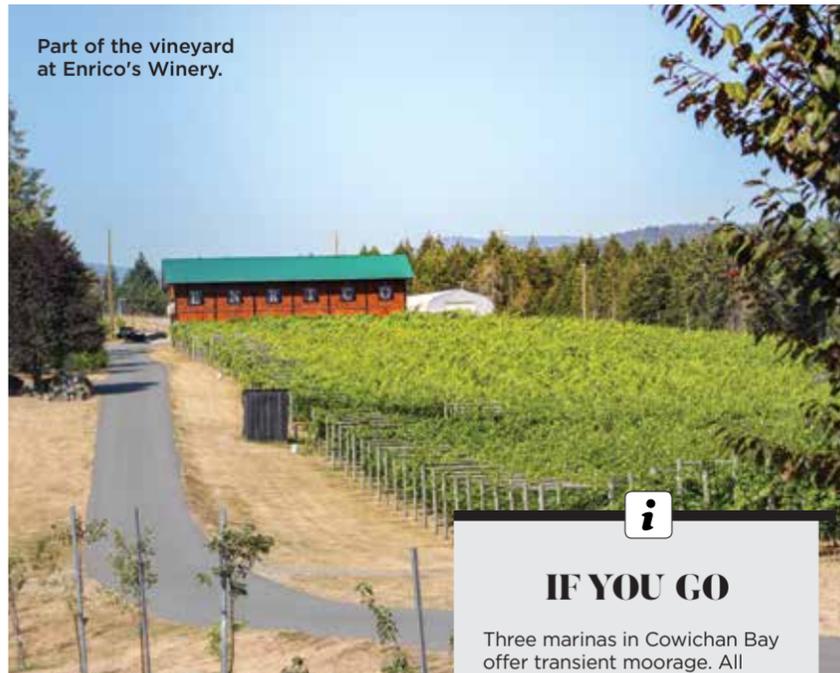


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Part of the vineyard at Enrico's Winery.

IF YOU GO

Three marinas in Cowichan Bay offer transient moorage. All three provide direct access to the village stores and restaurants.

Dungeness Marina. Transient moorage available for vessels up to 90 feet. Showers; 30 amp & water; laundry at Pier 66; pump-out station; wifi. Phone 250-748-6789 or email pier65@shaw.ca for reservations and arrival.

Bluenose Marina. Transient moorage available. 15 to 30-amp power; showers and laundry. Phone 250-748-2222 or email Deven@Bluenosemarina.com for reservations and arrival.

Cowichan Bay Fisherman's Wharf. 500 feet of transient moorage; 30-amp power, showers and laundry. No reservations. VHF 66A, phone 250-746-5911 or email CBFWA@shaw.ca the day of arrival.

If you need parts, **Classic Marine** can be found in the same strip. They offer both new and used marine supplies, and their café serves freshly made clam chowder and kiwi pie.

The "Taste of Cowichan" tour we joined is run by Leif Bogwald's **Vancouver Island Expeditions.** It's one of many choices the company offers (vancouverislandexpeditions.com, 1-877-334-756). The other company that runs local foodie tours is **Cheers Cowichan** (cheerscowichan.com, 250-710-7391). They start their tours in Cowichan Bay.

included in the "Charme de L'île" appellation, the French term the Wine Islands Growers Association has registered as a Vancouver Island-specific trade name for sparkling wines. We sampled Unsworth's Pinot Blanc, described as presenting flavours of "bright, fresh pear, green apple and citrus with delicate notes of fennel and herbs with distinctively pronounced Vancouver Island minerality" (I must admit I didn't notice the fennel). We ended our session with a lovely port-style wine, Ovation, with its "earthy chocolate and black pepper" notes.

We passed a large hop farm on the way to Emandare Vineyard, owned by Mike and Robin Nierychchlo, our last stop. They embroidered on their initials to name their winery—just sound it out! This energetic young couple's efforts started as a wine hobby, which turned into a commercial enterprise when they found a vineyard to buy about five years ago. After pruning, weeding, suckering and thinning, they produced their first wines in 2014, a 50-percent blend of Siegerrebe and Gewurztraminer grapes. They are devoted to sustainability, which for them means 100 percent estate-grown grapes, organically farmed and dry farmed (no irrigation). Vinification takes place "the old-fashioned way," they say, naturally, without commercial yeasts or other additives.

Their pinot noir, which they explain is "the grape of Vancouver Island," ripens slowly and is suitable to pair with just about all foods. We also tried Clara, an off-dry white wine made from Siegerrebe grapes; it's named after the couple's new daughter. Their rosé was sold out, so we had to settle for a delicious taste of Marechal-Cabernet Foch, which is hyped as "bright."

After visiting this last tasting room, all six of us were ready to return to the boat. I noted that throughout all these hours, no one was checking their phone—all eyes and mouths were intent on experiencing the wines, food and the rural environment. Everyone appreciated this small corner of Vancouver Island, where hard-working individuals have used their "terroir" for vintning first-rate and distinctive wines. ▶

attractive tasting room, we could see row upon row of trellised vines. Dense clusters of green and purple grapes absorbed the hot sunlight, readying themselves to metamorphose into seven wine varieties described variously as tasting of "fields of straw," with a "sweet temperament," or with "the soft fruity nuance of wild strawberry."

Manager Lorin Inglis decanted samples of Enrico wine, including the 2018 Gold Medal winner Estate Reserve Confessor, which he said, is "fully oaked in Canadian and French barrels," and "grown in 'terroir local.'" That French term means that climate, weather, location, groundwater and the chemistry of the soil influence the unique flavour of the grapes and subsequent wines. We also tasted a "crisp apple" Pinot Gris, and a new varietal Petit Milo. By the time I tried the Red Dragon Rosé—vastly better than the cheap super-sweet rosés of our university days—my head was feeling the buzz.

Our unhurried guide, Brandon, then drove us to Unsworth's Winery, which is a destination with its converted farmhouse restaurant, stylish tasting room, landscaped pond and outdoor seating. We again bellied up to the bar and tasted the vineyard's most popular red, pinot noir. Their sparkling wines are

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