



The lush Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island is a veritable wonderland of organic farms and fresh food—wines, dairy, teas, herbs, orchards, beer, mushrooms, salmon, chicken, etc.—and spiritual home to the “Slow Food” movement. **Shana Ting Lipton** heads to the green paradise in search of pure gastronomical bliss, and the world’s first legal organic cannabis farm.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHANA TING LIPTON
+ COURTESY OF FAIRBURN FARM
& DAMALI LAVENDER FARM

“Some people have never seen dirt on food,” says Mara Jernigan, as her gum boots make tracks on the soft soil of Fairburn Farm in Vancouver Island’s Cowichan Valley. Fairburn is the place Jernigan and her 19-year-old son call home. Her cooking, at the farm’s B&B, is renowned on the Island. She also teaches culinary classes—often to fresh-off-the-plane “city folk.”

“It’s so great to take people to just pull a carrot out of the ground,” she says, adding that her guests often react with childlike exuberance to the experience. She crouches over, foraging for dinner ingredients—rutabagas, as well as such regionalized wild plants as knotting onions and miner’s lettuce.

Such a basic activity as gathering vegetables seems novel to visitors from the city, like myself, who have grown accustomed to pre-cut bar-coded beets in shrink wrap at the supermarket. It’s practically quotidian ritual for residents of British Columbia’s Cowichan Valley, known for its mild, mediterranean climate. The name Cowichan is said to be derived from a First Nations (native tribes) word meaning “Warm Land.”

A breathtaking drive over the Malahat or a picturesque ferry ride from Vancouver brings you to the southern end of Cowichan Valley and the communities of Shawnigan Lake, Mill Bay, and Cobble Hill. Buffered by a ridge of high mountains to the west and warmed by the Strait of Georgia to the east, the region claims the highest average temperature in Canada, which creates ideal growing conditions for almost any crop. Approximately, a quarter of Vancouver Island’s cultivated land is found in the valley and it’s a local tradition to sell products fresh off the farm. Historically a mining area, the Valley’s food and wine reputation didn’t take root until 1990, when the first official licenses were awarded to such pioneering vineyards as Cherry Point, Zanatta Winery, and the apple cider-producing Merridale Ciderworks. The foodie explosion has occurred in recent years attracting chefs and culinary tourists to what food critic James Barber calls “Canada’s Provence.”

The emerald Cowichan Valley is dotted with amateur-turned-pro vintners and farmers that seem to produce everything: wine grapes, cider apples, aromatic herbs, fresh fish, blueberries,

buffalo mozzarella cheese, mushrooms, and even (a rumored experiment by one Valley dweller) Perigord truffles. “No one really heard how *those* turned out,” Jernigan says, shrugging her shoulders.

Clearly, the Cowichan Valley is a hotbed of agricultural and creative experimentation. It draws artists and artisans, as well as tuned-in and dropping out yuppies. The farms also attract visiting Wwoofers (participants in World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms), many of them college-aged travelers off to see the world affordably and productively by laboring and living on farms.

Drive through the hilly two-lane back roads of the Valley and you’ll see looming Douglas fir trees jut out from vast, green fields and *Lord of the Rings*-type forests. Such wide open spaces are occasionally interrupted by quaint farms. If the flock of Canada geese gliding over the Somenos Marsh, or the red cedar trees lining the Cowichan River, make you doubt the existence of humans for a moment, the occasional hand-scrawled sign along the road will pull you out of your reverie: ORGANIC EGGS or MILK they read. Slow down and pull over next to

one and you’re likely to see the farm fresh product sitting in a basket beside a collection box. The honor system still works here 90% of the time, according to some locals. Such country values have attracted a new slew of urbanites in search of a better life.

A common archetype around these parts is the successful, often well-off metropolitan couple that has given it all up to buy land and set up an organic farm, vineyard, or B&B. Bruce and Leslie Stewart’s story follows a similar arc. Despite having grown up in small towns, they moved to Cowichan Bay (“Cow Bay,” to locals) from Toronto. Coming from the food industry, it wasn’t much of a stretch that Bruce bought True Grain, a bakery located at the beginning of the bay’s boardwalk.

“I used to sit in my car an hour each way on a 12-lane highway,” he recalls. Now a typical day starts with him biking peacefully through the estuary as the sun comes up. “Take your time, eh,” is, after all, an oft-heard phrase in the region. “You see bald eagles sometimes in the trees, and wave at the other business owners you know,” he says with a smile.

The value of such simple pleasures ex-

tends to Stewart’s bread philosophy. That’s right, baked goods have ideologies in this valley where food and values are deeply intertwined. He proudly explains that True Grain is a heritage bakery—they use non-hybridized, non-GMO heritage varieties of wheat whose roots go back to Ancient Egypt. They even sell some breads with only three ingredients: flower, water, and salt. “People have gone too far in the technology of making food,” he says.

Stewart explores this idea with his friends at Cittaslow, a municipal organization whose Cowichan Bay wing he presides over as president. Fairburn’s Mara Jernigan is the Vice President. Cittaslow, meaning “slow city” in Italian, began in 1999 in Italy as an association of mayors that embraced the values of another movement in Vancouver Island: Slow Food. Slow Food—the movement—seems to sum up the philosophy that holds the Cowichan Valley community together. “The most political thing you can do is eat a meal,” enthuses Jernigan. “We all eat three times a day.” But when Slow Foodies eat, they don’t just ram food down their throats absent-mindedly while zoning out to reality



“The hunted are elusive, aromatic, and alluring. They lurk in forests and fields. The hunter’s reward for perseverance is a sensual earthy culinary encounter few experience first hand.... The Saturday mushroom hunts are led by Brother Michael, a Benedictine Monk from the Sole Dao Monastery.”

Silverside Farm



TV. A meal is an experience to be enjoyed with friends through good conversation...at a...leisurely...pace.

At one of the top restaurants on the Island, Amusé Bistro, lorded over by Rhode Island born chef Bradley Boisvert, it's not uncommon for diners to set aside at least a couple of hours to indulge in a meal. I mean, who wouldn't want to take their time sampling pan-seared locally farmed sweet breads or wild mushroom encrusted trout in a quaint seven-table maisonette to the tunes of Edith Piaf?

And then there's the wine, organically fermented at Averill Creek Vineyard just six miles away. "If you go to Averill Creek and you talk to Andy make sure you let him know that I served you the Pinot Noir in *that* style of glass," requests Boisvert's wife Leah Bellerive. "He's very particular."

Community loyalty goes hand-in-hand with integrity in the Valley. Many locals are about as close-knit as the Cowichan sweat-ers made famous by their indigenous peoples. Amusé sometimes carries breads from True Grain Bakery, and cheese from Hilary's Cheese Shop (next to the bakery). Teas are

furnished by the nearby Art Tea Farm.

Artfarm, as its hub is called, is owned by Danish ceramics artist Margit Nellemen and her Montreal native artist husband Victor Vesely. Despite their hip eccentricity, the pair took a similar trajectory to the executives-turned-farmers when they settled in the Valley seven years ago and started Art Tea Farm.

They import and sell teas to which they sometimes add personally grown calen-dula, lavender, mint, chamomile, and a local weed called stinging nettle. They have also embarked on the experiment of growing their own black tea. Their guests come by to enjoy the British tradition of high tea and treats, while shopping for hand-crafted (sans wheel) ceramic tea kettles, cups, and art.

Nelleman and Vesely's combination atelier-tea house—complete with composting toilet—has the same country cozy feel you'd find in most places in the area. Yet it has a more consciously kitsch design sensibility—something of the cool city dweller's perspective on the country. A silver minimalist tea kettle sits atop a free-standing old black fireplace, which the couple's dogs languor

beneath, sacked out on a native Indian rug. Chocolate brown and vanilla bean colored tile-work accentuates the scene—a mix of new post modern style and campy old rustic-ity. "Everyone here's got their shtick," jokes Vesely, citing his farmer overalls as his look.

Nelleman wants to take me on a car tour of the island—"show me the sights." We head down Mays Road, possibly the most beautiful road I have ever been on, and then Richard's Trail, which is preposterously bu-colic and dreamy in its own right. We pass cattle crossing signs as well as a lazy dairy farm. Nelleman points out several so-called "grow ops" whose owners were arrested and charged for illegal marijuana cultivation.

Cannabis—perfect to grow in this mild climate—is legal only for medicinal uses and is strictly regulated by the government. However, Island Harvest, a secretive organic cannabis farm in Duncan operates through legal channels providing medicinally for a handful of patients. Its founders, Eric Nash and Wendy Little, also spend their time consulting, on the Island and beyond, on how to operate a legal marijuana plantation. They

aren't on any tourist maps or in the travel books so I'm depending on the kindness of the locales to point me in the right direction. So far I've gotten, "Ask me at the pub later," "I'll take you there on Sunday," and "It's a myth, it doesn't exist."

Psychedelic mushrooms, too, according to one local, grow wild in small patches in certain areas of the Valley, although no one seems to know where. "Richard's Trail is known for pot growers," Nelleman chimes in. "This guy spent some time in jail; he's a bit of a character," she says, pointing to one particular house. (According to reports, the first floor contained a large-scale psilocybin mushroom—or magic mushroom—laboratory for producing spores, which were stored in flaps and syringes for distribution.) "This is a recording studio—a music producer lives here," she points to another. I mention that some Neil Young songs would go perfectly in this fertile, rural Canadian landscape. In fact, says Nelleman, Young was in the area recently performing a charity concert on the invitation of Randy Bachman (of Bachman Turner Overdrive) who lives on nearby Salt Spring Island, which became

famous during the 1960s as a refuge for US draft dodgers and, of course, its mythical healing salt baths.

Ingeborg Woodsworth has for a long time espoused the bounty of the Cowichan Valley. On her lush five acres at Mayo Creek Gardens, eight kilometers east of Lake Cowichan, Woodsworth's property is an abundance of natural plants that flourish around the largely untouched habitat. Her belief in locally grown food and her passion for mushrooms (she estimates she has close to 60 varieties of mushrooms on her property) led her to initiate the annual Salmon and Mushroom Festival in Lake Cowichan.

"I'm doing this because I'm a member of the Lake Cowichan community," said Woodsworth, her cool-Auntie sparkle in her eyes aglow. "There are more mushrooms here in the Cowichan Valley than on the Lower Mainland. And we all know about the world famous salmon that comes from our area. Together they are a perfect meal combination." The festival includes a number of booths featuring food, arts and crafts, and has been a nice calling card for the area.

A local blog describes another kind of "attraction" in the Valley this way: "Wickedly wild, exotic, and hidden—the hunt is on. The hunters equipped with sensible shoes, rain gear and words of wisdom from mushroom lovers of great repute. The hunted are elusive, aromatic and alluring. They lurk in forest and field. The hunter's reward for perseverance is a sensual earthy culinary encounter few experience first hand. The hunted give up their treasures this one time, perhaps to be grilled, perchance a sauté; a small gastronomic offering from those who will always remain wild and untamed. The Saturday mushroom hunts are led by Brother Michael, a Benedictine Monk from the Sole Dao Monastery, who supplies local restaurants with mushrooms."

And when not spying mushrooms check out the Saanichton Christmas Tree & Ostrich Farm, where the virtually fat-free ostrich meat is available all year, and the gift shop is loaded with ostrich leather products, decorated eggshells, ostrich oil, skin moisturizers, and massage oil. In November and December you can also choose and cut your own Christmas Tree—saw provided.



The best
composts for
growing organic cannabis
are fruit bearing vines—
cantaloupes, grapes, watermelon,
blueberries—or a combination
of natural organic material such
as manure, worm castings,
bat guano, seabird
guano, and
sea kelp.

The Cowichan Valley consists of the communities of Duncan, Shawnigan Lake, Port Renfrew, Cobble Hill, Geona Bay, Maple Bay, Crofton, Chemainus, Lake Cowichan, Youbou, Honeymoon Bay, and Ladysmith. (The latter is perhaps best known as the hometown of Pamela Anderson.)

Although Valley residents are proud of their home, they do disdain ostentatious and obnoxious outsiders coming in and polluting the purity and magic of the land. With the privilege of such natural beauty comes a sense of responsibility and commitment to maintain it. Alison Philp of Damali Lavender Farm—who grew up in the Cowichan Valley—loves the lush summers but laments the rowdy river scene that comes with the season via “the tubers.” When the weather warms up in May and June, some enjoy a floating party as they waft down the river in tubes, sipping locally brewed beers and munching on fat succulent strawberries.

Philp points out that there are other great social activities on the lavender farm and B&B she tends with good friends Marsha and David Stanley. “We have a laven-

der festival every year at Damali Lavender Farm—this year it’s July 31st—and we have a lot of artists, music, and crafts that focus on lavender,” she says, adding that attendance was 700 the previous year and they raised over \$3000 for a cancer charity.

Another highlight of the festival—and the land—is the labyrinth below the Damali farm house and above the goats. It is also incorporated into their occasional spiritual workshops. That’s not to be confused with a maze, Philp explains: “A maze is where you get lost—a labyrinth is where you find yourself.”

In a similarly spiritual vein, the farm/ B&B’s name, Damali, is a combination of part of the names Dave, Marsh, and Alison, which they later discovered means “beautiful vision” in Arabic. Apropos, considering the property’s breathtaking vistas. If you stand at the foot of the farm house and look out towards Telegraph Road, you can actually across international borders back to the United States.

Deer and antelope play, and buffalo roam, here in Cowichan as well. The latter do so in a rather subdued manner at Fairburn Farm. While there, Jernigan leads

me to a herd of 40 grazing Finnish water buffalos imported by farm owners Darryl and Anthea Archer. Their unmistakable musk precedes them. Despite a sad backstory (their predecessors were killed by the government due to unfounded fears of Mad Cow Disease) they give Fairburn the proud distinction of being Canada’s only water Buffalo dairy farm.

The buffalo’s heads turn slowly from left to right, observing Jernigan and myself with dead-pan eyes. In the summer, farm animals such as the buffalo amass down in the field while guests sit on the veranda eating breakfast and watching them come up to get milked.

“We have an agricultural society that has been around over 140 years and is still active,” she says as we walk gingerly through a mine-field of bovine droppings. “There’s a genuineness you don’t find everywhere and a real nice mix of old timers and new knowledge.”

And, of course, the best organic wine, herbs, milk, orchards, mushrooms, berries, lavender, chicken, lamb, venison, and cannabis in the world. 🌿

ISLAND HARVEST: IN SEARCH OF THE MYSTERIOUS ORGANIC MEDICAL MARIJUANA FARM

Deep inside a mist-ribboned valley, hidden not only by the wet, white-shrouds but by nests of maple and alder trees, lies the only legal medicinal marijuana plantation in the world. There’s no sign, no fanfare, no B&B or guided tours. This place is, well, top secret.

In the Cowichan Valley, everyone takes pride in organic cultivation—and none more than organic cannabis farmers Wendy Little and Eric Nash of the Island Harvest Plantation. The pair’s federally licensed medicinal crops were certified organic by the British Columbian government in 2003. Cannabis cultivation and sale is currently legal for medicinal purposes via the Health Care Canada program—which wasn’t distributing any of its own product when Island Harvest began. Little, who grew up in the Valley, became interested in the program and cultivation when her father was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease and sought a marijuana prescription. He got one—but for the synthetic form, Marinol, as his doctor refused to fill out the extensive (20-30 page) paperwork required by the government.

Little and Nash now legally grow their organically-certified, medicinal crops at an undisclosed location in the Valley. Organic marijuana is the technique of using no pesticides, fertilizers or soil. The list of growing mediums is usually a combination of natural organic material such as manure, worm castings, bat guano, seabird guano, sea kelp, steamed bone meal, blood meal, fish, oat bran and numerous composts. Best composts are fruit and fruit bearing vines (cantaloupes, grapes, watermelon, blueberries). The growing medium used can effect the taste of the marijuana, providing a concentrated source of calcium, magnesium, nitrogen, phosphates and potash. They all produce a rich earthy flavor with noticeable differences. The couple use a relatively simple method of production employing organic soil and nutrients. “We like the simple aspect of organics; it’s very forgiving,” says Nash, adding that hydroponic production is “more about quantity and volume, and if something goes wrong it can turn a crop into a disaster overnight.” Conversely, in organic growing, one notices sudden changes in the soil and they can be addressed immediately. “You get more in touch with each plant, there’s more of a natural bond with it,” he enthuses.

Their marijuana plantation remains small due to government ordinances and a legal labyrinth that’s not easy to navigate. Though anyone in Canada can theoretically become a supplier, Nash explains, “We’re the only ones licensed to supply multiple patients.”

Most of their renown, in fact, comes not from their medicinal business, but from their informational website (*islandharvest.ca*), their book *Sell Marijuana Legally*, and consulting work. The latter took off in 2003 when the Canadian Federal government asked the pair to instruct Health Canada in Ottawa on how to administer the program and make it better for patients.

Beyond Island Harvest, British Columbia has its share of so-called marijuana distributing “compassion clubs.” Local police and many in the federal government often turn a blind eye to these technically illegal establishments (which serve 25,000 in Canada) according to Nash. By law no one is allowed to turn a profit from the sale of marijuana (with the exception of medicinal suppliers). So, compassion clubs are non-profit. “Every time the federal government winds up in court with them, the judge says the clubs are providing a valuable community service and the government loses,” he says. “But they don’t have the forward-thinking ability to license the clubs.” He continues: “94% of Canadian population supports medical use and there are 1.2 million medical cannabis consumers here.”



WHO, WHAT, WHERE

ACCOMMODATIONS

Damali Lavender Farm
3500 Telegraph Rd.
Cobble Hill
250-742-4100
damali.ca

Fairburn Farm
3310 Jackson Rd., Duncan
250-746-4637
fairburnfarm.bc.ca

Maple Grove Guest House
3800 Gibbons Rd., Duncan
250-701-9116
maplegrovestguesthouse.ca

**Oceanfront Resort
and Marina**
1681 Cowichan Bay Rd.
Cowichan Bay
250-715-7100
oceanfrontgrandresort.com

VINEYARDS

Alderlea
1751 Stamps Rd., Duncan
250-746-7122

Averill Creek
6552 North Rd., Duncan
250-709-9986
averillcreek.ca

Blue Grouse
365 Blue Grouse Rd..
Duncan
250-743-1272
bluegrousevineyards.com

Rocky Creek
1854 Myhrest Rd.
Cowichan Bay
250-748-5622
rockycreekwinery.ca

Silverside Farm
3810 Cobble Hill Rd.
Cobble Hill
250-743-9149
silversidefarm.com

Venturi-Schulze
4235 Vineyard Rd.
Cobble Hill
250-743-5630
venturischulze.com

RESTAURANTS, PUBS, BARS

Steeple's Restaurant
2744 E. Shawnigan Lake Rd.
Shawnigan
250-743-1887
steeple'srestaurant.ca

**Merridale Estate Cidery/
Bistro de Pommerai**
230 Merridale Rd., Cobble Hill
250-743-4293
merridalecidery.com

Amuse Bistro
1753 Shawnigan,
Mill Bay Rd.
250-743-3667
amusebistro.com

Craig Street Pub
25 Craig St., Duncan
250-737-BEER
craigstreet.ca

Saison
7575 Mays Rd., Duncan

OTHER THINGS TO DO

Artfarm/Teafarm
8350 Richard’s Trail
North Cowichan
250-748-3811
artfarm.ca

**Reflections
Holistic Retreat**
5534 Carolyn Way, Duncan
250-737-1800
reflectionsholisticretreat.com