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Short Trips: Cider houses rule on a delicious fall visit

By JANICE MUCALOV
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

The cider apples are hanging heavy in the trees and, as autumn arrives, workers will shake the branches and the ripe apples that drop will be picked from the soft orchard ground, funneled into a press and squished into cider juice.

"Fall is an exciting time to visit," says Janet Docherty, who with her husband, Rick, owns the Merridale Estate Cidery, a 30-minute drive north of Victoria. "It's a beehive of activity, and the smells are wonderful."

On a recent late-summer visit, we contented ourselves with a free tasting of their seven ciders. We immediately noticed how different they are from commercial, cooler-type ciders, which use synthetic flavorings.

Real cider is fermented, 100 percent pure, undiluted apple juice, perhaps with a little added yeast or sugar, depending on the style. It's also not as sweet as the summer sippers and wins us over. We end up buying some of the dry-champagne-style Somerset cider and a bottle of the portlike Winter Apple, perfect for Christmas.

We also strolled the 20-acre orchard on a self-guided tour and admired a large new, hand-hammered copper Mueller still from Germany, which Merridale will be using to make calvados (apple brandy).

Boutique, family-owned cideries and wineries on southern Vancouver Island have blossomed big-time in recent years and are turning out award-winning products. As well as Merridale (British Columbia's first estate cidery and Canada's largest fine-cider producer), there are two other new cideries, plus 13 wineries in the Cowichan and Saanich areas around Victoria.



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Craigdarrach Castle is a 19th-century mansion built for coal baron Robert Dunsmuir. The history of Dunsmuir's family -- especially how his grandchildren managed to drink and gamble away his fortune -- is fascinating.

Burgundy grape signs on the roads point the way to the small vineyards and orchards, which offer free public tastings. If you're visiting without a car, tour operators like Crush Wine Tours offer half- and full-day excursions from downtown Victoria. And fall -- when the cider apples and wine grapes are harvested and crushed -- is the perfect time to visit.

For a personalized stay, bed down in a bed-and-breakfast such as the Villa Marco Polo Inn, tucked away in a leafy residential quarter of Victoria. Built in 1923 as a gift to a bride, it's now an exquisite four-suite B&B, with hardwood floors, Persian rugs and antique furniture. But the best part of staying here has to be the gourmet three-course breakfasts.

"Let's go for a walk," suggested my husband, George, after we'd drained our coffee on the first morning of our weekend getaway.

Just down the street from the inn, we wandered around the 36 acres of gardens and grounds of Government House, where B.C.'s lieutenant governor lives. The property is open to the public from dawn to dusk. Its woodlands preserve one of the last remaining Garry oak ecosystems in Canada, and the gnarled limbs of these fragile trees are striking.

As we continue our stroll, we pass the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Featuring a permanent display of paintings by the province's most prominent artist, Emily Carr, the gallery also is exhibiting a temporary collection of photographs by conceptual Canadian artist Iain Baxter (until Oct. 14) and some stunning folk textiles from Japan (until Nov. 11).

We also checked out Craigdarroch Castle, a 19th-century mansion built for coal baron Robert Dunsmuir. The history of Dunsmuir's family -- especially how his grandchildren managed to drink and gamble away his fortune -- is fascinating. But we were eager to get outside again and walk down to the ocean beaches along Dallas Road.

The Villa Marco Polo Inn also is just a five-minute drive from the Belfry Theatre, a beautifully restored heritage church that is a venue for contemporary plays. For a light meal, it's worth popping into the new Stage wine bar around the corner.

The next morning, we drove to Goldstream Provincial Park. It's quiet and peaceful now, but between October and December, the shallow Goldstream River is a spectacle of nature. That's when some 40,000 chum salmon return from the ocean to spawn.

The river is literally packed with moving fish. Some will be working their way farther upstream, while others (females) will dig a "redd" or trench in the gravel bottom to lay their eggs. Watch closely, and you can see them repeatedly raise their tails violently away from the gravel, creating a vacuum that lifts the stones, which are then swept away by the current, leaving the desired nest.



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Cider apples from Merridale Estate Cidery -- British Columbia's first estate cidery and Canada's largest fine-cider producer.



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A pebble beach along Dallas Road in Victoria is a peaceful place to take in the views of the Olympic Mountains.

The exhausted salmon then die, and the eagle feeding extravaganza begins. Come December, more than 250 bald eagles and other prey move into the park to feast.

It wasn't until the afternoon of our last day that we made it to Merridale. And to Cherry Point Vineyards, which is First Nations owned and operated. Counting previous visits, we've now sipped our way through several wineries and cideries, but there are plenty more for us to discover.

Reason enough to return to Victoria again this fall.

If you go

Lodging

Villa Marco Polo Inn -- 1524 Shasta Place. Rates from \$220 (U.S.) until Oct. 14, then from \$180 (U.S.) in winter. 877-601-1524, 250-370-1524; villamarcopolo.com

Cider and wine tours

Merridale Estate Cidery -- Free cider-tastings year-round. Pair different ciders with pate and cheese at the onsite Bistro La Pommeraie. 800-998-9908; merridalecider.com

Crush Wine Tours -- 877-888-5748; crushwinetours.com

Wine Islands Vintners Association -- Find Victoria-area member wineries and cideries at wineislands.ca

Goldstream Provincial Park

Salmon dissections, eagle watching tours and other public programs on autumn weekends.

goldstreampark.com

Belfry Theatre

"Homechild" (drama about a farmer searching for his sister) until Oct. 21; "Glorious" (comedy about the worst singer in the world), Nov. 6-Dec. 9. belfry.bc.ca

A trio of restaurants to try

Stage -- Hot new wine bar for wines by the glass and tasty tapas. 1307 Gladstone Ave. 250-388-4204

Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub -- Canada's oldest brewpub. Great beer and casual food. 308 Catherine St. spinnakers.com

Red Fish Blue Fish -- A creative, new takeout fish-and-chips place on the wharf downtown. Delicious wild salmon and oysters. redfish-bluefish.com

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