



## **Falling for Victoria; [Final Edition]**

**Janice Mucalov. North Shore News. North Vancouver, B.C.: Oct 7, 2007. pg. 31**

The cider apples are hanging heavy in the trees this sunny late- summer afternoon.

But as autumn arrives, workers will shake the branches, and the ripe apples that have dropped will be picked from the soft orchard ground, funneled into the press, and squished like an accordion into cider.

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

For now, we content ourselves with a free tasting of their seven ciders. We immediately notice how different they are from commercial cooler-type ciders, which use synthetic flavourings. Real cider is fermented, 100% 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 port-like Winter Apple, perfect for Christmas.

We also stroll the 20-acre orchard on a self-guided tour, and admire 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 -- turning out award-winning products -- have blossomed big-time in recent years. As well as Merridale (British Columbia's first estate cidery and Canada's largest fine cider producer), there are two other new cideries, plus some 13 wineries in the Cowichan and Saanich areas around Victoria. 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.

After each visit to Victoria, we think we've pretty much done all there is to do in the city. We've window-shopped along Government Street, sipped bubbly on the veranda of the venerable Empress hotel (better than afternoon tea!), snapped photos of the roses at Butchart Gardens, indulged my plea to take a whale watching trip (not a good idea on that rough day), and gratified George's passion for perusing the books at Munro's Bookstore, described by columnist and author Alan Fotheringham as "the most magnificent bookstore in Canada, possibly in North America."

But the city continues to surprise us. There are always new restaurants tempting one or both of us to forsake our diets, fresh exhibits at the Royal BC Museum, and

previously undiscovered walks and nearby villages to explore. Now there are the cideries and wineries. 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 B&B such as the Villa Marco Polo Inn, tucked away in the leafy Rockland 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. Our suite's bathroom, complete with a huge gilt-edged mirror, is bigger than our son's bedroom. And as I look out over the beautiful Italian Renaissance garden and reflecting pool from our Juliet balcony, I can easily see why the inn is a choice place for the 15 to 20 weddings held here each year.

But the best part of staying at the Villa Marco Polo has to be the three-course breakfasts -- perhaps grilled grapefruit and peach topped with caramelized ginger, buttermilk ten-grain muffins and a fruit smoothie to start, followed by poached egg on a bed of polenta with lemon sauce, then finishing off with pear pancakes and ginger syrup or a piping hot lemon lavender souffl.

"Let's go for a walk," suggests George after we've drained our coffee the first morning of our weekend getaway. Just down the street from the inn, we wander around the 36 acres of gardens and grounds at Government House, where our lieutenant governor lives (the property is open to the public from dawn to dusk). Its woodlands preserve one of the last few remaining Garry Oak eco- systems left in Canada, and the gnarled limbs of these fragile trees are striking.

Continuing our stroll, we pass the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Featuring a permanent display of paintings by Emily Carr, the gallery is also exhibiting a temporary collection of photographs by conceptual Canadian artist Iain Baxter (until October 14) and some stunning folk textiles from Japan (until November 11).

We also stumble across Craigdarroch Castle. Thinking it too "touristy," we've never made the effort before to visit the 19th century mansion, built for coal baron Robert Dunsmuir. But as it's looming right in front of us now, we pop in. The history of Dunsmuir's family -- especially how his grandchildren managed to drink and gamble away his entire fortune -- is fascinating. But the shuttered oak-panelled rooms are dark, and we're happy to get outside again in the light and walk down to the ocean beaches along Dallas Road.

As well as being well located for this great city walk, the Villa Marco Polo Inn is also just a five-minute drive away from the Belfry Theatre. A beautifully restored heritage church, it showcases contemporary plays. Homechild (a drama about a farmer searching for his sister) runs until Oct. 21, and Glorious (a comedy about the worst singer in the world) plays from Nov. 6 to Dec. 9. For tasty tapas, perhaps before or after a show, it's worth popping into the new Stage wine bar around the corner too.

The next morning, we drive to Goldstream Provincial Park. It's quiet and peaceful now. But between October and December, the shallow Goldstream River is a veritable 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, lined head to tail just one foot apart from each other. Some will be working their way 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.

Of course, the exhausted salmon then die -- and the eagle extravaganza begins. Come December, over 250 bald eagles and other prey move into Goldstream Provincial Park to feast on the dead salmon.

Driving north from Goldstream Provincial Park, on the way to the BC Ferry terminal at Nanaimo for our return trip home, we stop in at Merridale. Then Cherry Point Vineyards, a picturesque place that 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 still discover. Reason enough to visit Victoria again this fall.

IF YOU GO:

- Villa Marco Polo Inn:

This elegant 5-Star Canada Select Inn is a Conde Nast Johansens recommended property. Ask about their fall theatre and opera packages. Rates from \$230 until October 14, then from \$190 in winter. 1-877-601-1524. [www.villamarcopolo.com](http://www.villamarcopolo.com).

- Cideries and Wineries:

Find a complete list of wineries and cideries belonging to the Wine Islands Vintners Association at [www.wineislands.ca](http://www.wineislands.ca).

- A Trio of Restaurants to Try:

Stage -- Hot new wine bar for wines by the glass and delicious small plates. 1307 Gladstone Ave. 250-388-4204.

**Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub - Canada's oldest brewpub. Great beer and casual food. 308 Catherine St. [www.spinnakers.com](http://www.spinnakers.com).**

Red Fish Blue Fish -- A creative, new take-out fish-and-chip place on the wharf downtown. To-die-for wild salmon and oysters. [www.redfish-bluefish.com](http://www.redfish-bluefish.com).