

Tasting the Terroir in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley

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By Sandra MacGregor
Special to AOL Travel

"You're sure we're heading in the right direction?" asks my driving companion for the umpteenth time, adding "we're definitely on an odyssey, but an epicurean odyssey? I'm not so sure." I hate to admit it, but I'm beginning to share her doubts.

We've been driving for over an hour now and with each rise of yet another bucolic hillside framing yet another picturesque farmhouse, I'm finding it increasingly harder to believe that this sleepy agricultural oasis-lovely though it is to look at-hides some of the most exciting developments in Nova Scotia's gastronomic and vinicultural evolution.

No sooner have I articulated my incredulity than we arrive at Domaine de Grand Pré winery



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where within less than five minutes at the tasting bar, I'm crushing big time on the Nova Scotia wine scene. "Don't look so shocked," says local James Bourke, noticing my surprise, "we grow some of the best fruit in the country, why not some of the best grapes?" Why not indeed?

Less than 90 minutes outside of Halifax, Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, famed for its fertile, fruit-growing valleys, is now home to the province's nascent wine industry. Nestled throughout this pastoral countryside are over a dozen (and growing) wineries and not a single one is more than a decade old (Grand Pre, the oldest in the region, just celebrated its tenth anniversary).

Though the region's fruit farmers have always tended to focus on what grows above the ground, the wineries of Annapolis Valley are more interested on what lies beneath the surface. "We respect the character and composition of our soil - our terroir - and we only make wines that can thrive with our landscape and climate," explains Hanspeter Stutz, founder of Domaine de Grand Pre "After all, you can't trick Mother Nature."

This respect for both the limitations and bounties Mother Nature has to offer explains why, L'Acadie blanc (a grape variety with a light citrusy flavour that was developed specifically for Nova Scotia's climate), is the easiest varietal to grow and is the best seller at most of the province's wineries.



Despite being such a young wine region, expectations are big. Over at the nearby Gaspereau Vineyards, local Samantha Pierce, who has popped in to buy a case of seyval blanc, offers her opinion about the Valley's vinicultural value. "I see a bright future for the industry here. In another ten years Annapolis Valley will be more famous for its wines than its orchards." I treat myself to a bottle of Gaspereau's intoxicatingly delicious maple wine, and find myself agreeing with her prediction.

The excitement is clearly contagious; throughout the Annapolis Valley a correspondingly delectable food movement seems to be developing in tandem with the successful growth of the local wineries.

I am greeted with a resounding "Welcome to Nova Scotia's 'foodie belt'," as I enter Fox Hill Cheese House, the region's premiere cheese boutique.

"Nobody leaves The Valley without gaining a few pounds," agrees a fellow lactose-lover who is presently enjoying a scoop of Fox Hill's homemade ice cream. I decide a few pounds is a small price to pay, and make my way to a table where over a dozen cheeses are laid out for sampling. Selections range from the expected (gouda, feta), to the deliciously unexpected (blueberry cheddar and fenugreek havarti). My favourite is the quark, one of Fox Hill's best-sellers. It's the first time I have ever come across this delightfully named cheese, which tastes like a cross between cream cheese and ricotta. I buy several tubs and by the time I get to the car one is already half eaten. It's clear the Annapolis Valley is not a safe place for the calorie conscious.

As with the wines from the area, the cheese also reflects a love and appreciation for Annapolis Valley's distinct agrarian charms; "In our cheeses you will taste 'le gout de terroir' (the taste of the land)" says Jeanita Rand, owner of Fox Hill, as she explains that all their products are made from the milk of their own local herd of cows. "The rich farmland and the saltiness from the

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nearby marsh is the unique flavour that comes through in our cheeses because that is what our cows forage on."

My taste buds concur: there must indeed be something magic in Annapolis Valley's soil. And others obviously agree; last year, using Fox Hill's havarti, Michael Howell, the chef at the restaurant Tempest (another popular foodie destination) in the nearby town of Wolfville, won the national Grate Canadian Grilled Cheese Cook-off.

But the real *coup de grace* of Annapolis Valley's epicurean evolution is that they do what very few other wine regions can; they throw lobster into the mix. At Hall's Harbour Lobster Pound in nearby Kentville, diners are invited to the "pound" out back to hand-pick their crustacean of choice (plucked only hours before from the ocean). I enjoyed a 1.5 pound lobster with all the trimmings (bib included) and a tasty glass of L'Acadie blanc for under \$20 dollars.



The region may not yet feature a Bordeaux blend to rival Europe but some would argue (myself included) that fresh lobster and a local vintage amid the charms of rural Nova Scotia just can't be beat.

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