

MARCH | APRIL 2010

# Northwest palate

FOOD, WINE & TRAVEL OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

## from DIRT TO DELICIOUS

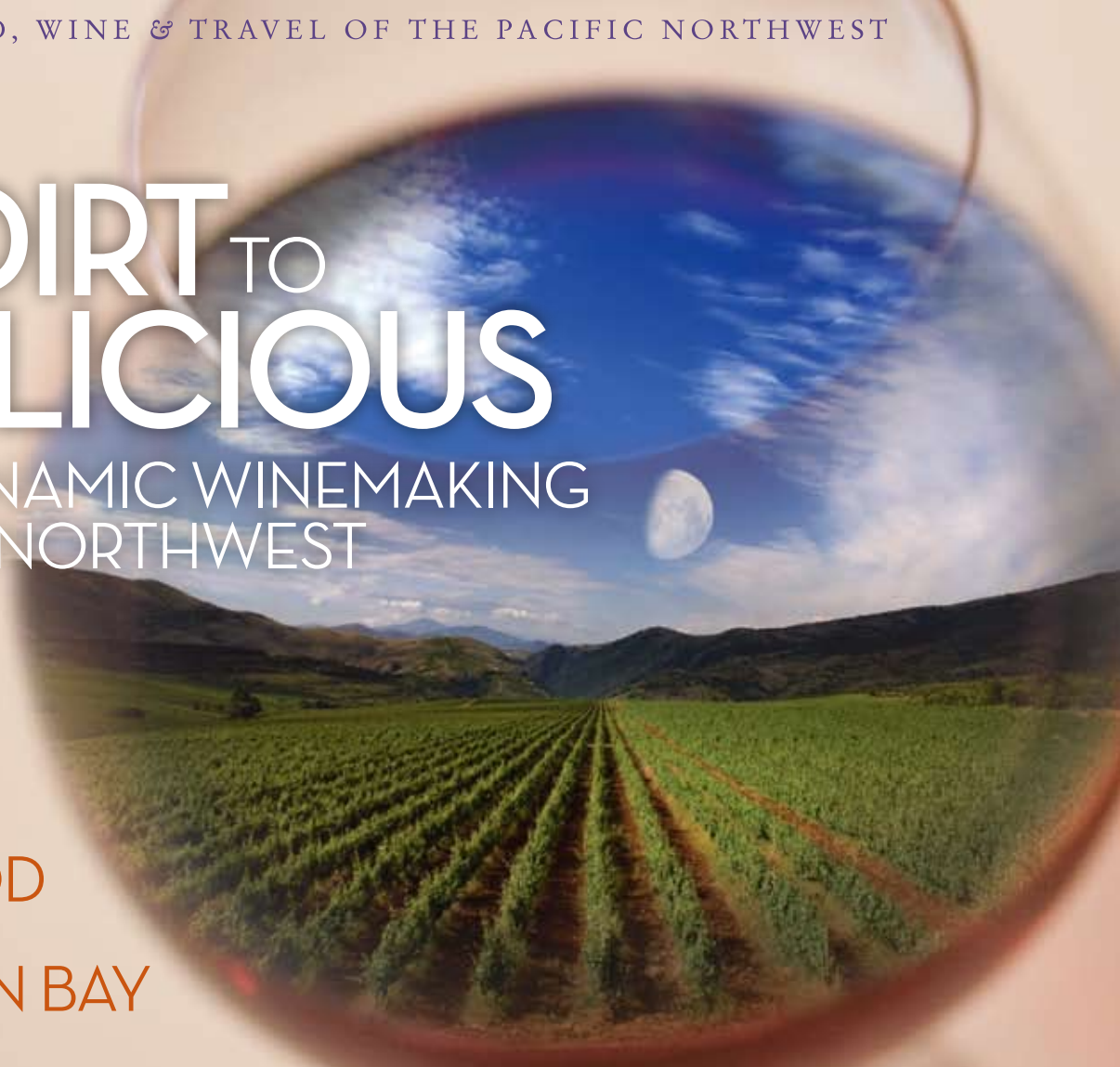
BIODYNAMIC WINEMAKING  
IN THE NORTHWEST

SLOW FOOD  
CENTRAL:  
COWICHAN BAY

57 FABULOUS  
NORTHWEST WINES

THE JOY OF SAKE

DISCOVER ANCIENT GRAINS





# COW BAY *crawl*

By Angie Jabine

When I learned last September that Cowichan Bay had just been named North America's first Cittaslow community, I was intrigued. Cittaslow (pronounced CHEE-tah-slow) is an offshoot of Italy's international Slow Food organization, and most of the towns it has honored for their resistance to a fast-paced, industrialized lifestyle are in Europe and Asia. How, I wondered, did Cittaslow even find out about "Cow Bay," an agricultural and fishing village on the inland coast of Vancouver Island? ¶ Then I discovered that the town's official Cittaslow ceremony, held this past September, would kick off a weekend of gala Cowichan Valley celebrations—the annual wine touring festival *and* Feast of Fields. I decided in a great big hurry to drop in on this officially "slow" community. Before you could say "Chill, girl!" I was zooming up the Trans-Canada Highway from Victoria International Airport to Cowichan Bay. To make up for being in such an all-fired rush, I allotted myself four full days in the Cowichan Valley, with plenty of time for serendipitous discoveries.



## DAY 1.

### *On the Trail of Snails*

I pull off the highway toward Cowichan Bay on Thursday morning just as photographers are posing local officials around the new, snail-adorned Cittaslow sign at the little park by the exit. I quickly identify Mara Jernigan, the proprietor of Fairburn Farm, President of Slow Food Canada, and a key Cittaslow instigator. We repair to nearby **Drumroaster Coffee** for a chat with Cittaslow's director, Pier Giorgio Oliveti, and its president, Gian Luca Marconi.

In Mara's English and the delegates' Italian, I learn over espresso that Mara first connected with Oliveti at Slow Food's *Salone del Gusto* in Italy a few years ago. Since then, several senior Slow Food representatives have visited Cowichan Bay. "They vouched for us," she says, citing Cow Bay's qualifications for a Cittaslow designation—as a community combining ample green space, freedom from big-box stores and chain restaurants, a strong indigenous culture, and a welcoming attitude towards visitors.

The officials head out for a ceremonial boat ride, so I continue into the village. The **Oceanfront Grand Resort**, where I'm staying, is generally photographed from the water because the view from the road is comparatively humble. But it sits oh-so-conveniently at the near end of the village's main drag, and I admire my little suite with its porthole windows before hopping back in the car with a tourist map for a leisurely drive.

The entire Cowichan (pronounced COW-i-chin) Valley, though bisected by the Trans-Canada Highway, is a place of dreamy beauty, where every third farmhouse seems to be selling fresh eggs, posies, or produce. Discreet signs point visitors to the nearest attractions and thus I choose my first stop, **Cherry Point Vineyards**. Here I see the first of the ubiquitous blue netting that Cowichan-area wineries use to fend off hungry birds.

Trailing a tour group, I hear the guide remark that Cherry Point loses 10% of its grapes to starlings. "Even with the netting, they'll flap against the nets to knock down the grapes," she says. "Two years ago, they did it so hard they knocked a post out." On the other hand, the grapes have no problems with leafcutters or other insects, perhaps because of the profuse blackberry plantings around the perimeter. ►



COURTESY CHERRY POINT VINEYARDS

Above: Cherry Point Vineyards is one of two indigenous-owned wineries in North America. Below: Mara Jernigan, culinary leader and proprietor of Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat and Guesthouse, is also president of Slow Food Canada.



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTO

Cherry Point is one of only two First Nations-owned wineries in North America, the other being Nk'Mip in B.C.'s South Okanagan Valley. Cherry Point's oldest vines are nineteen-year-old Ortegas, a hybrid grape, but they grow thirteen varieties in all, including Pinot Noir. They also make a fortified blackberry wine called Solera.

It's easy to choose my next stop. Every foodie on Vancouver Island has heard of **Cowichan Bay Farm**, a quirky complex of cottages and outbuildings for chickens, horses, ducks, a dairy, and a store where you can buy a frozen chicken or produce and leave your payment on the honor system. If you've had chicken at Café Brio in Victoria or Sooke Harbour House in Sooke, it was undoubtedly from here.

Once upon a time, this farm belonged to Nigel and Dorothy Kingscote, the grandparents of current proprietor Lyle Young. Lyle takes after his granddad, an "anachronistic old codger," who used to be fined a dollar a year by a sympathetic judge for selling unpasteurized milk, and who used draft horses for plowing until the 1970s.

Lyle had wanted to take over the farm since he was ten years old. "I don't think anyone believed it was going to happen," he recalls. "I have a degree in fine art, and my family said, 'I don't think so.' But that's what happened. We didn't make money here for fifteen years." He and his wife Fiona adapted; they established the adjacent Island Farmhouse Poultry, a chicken-processing plant that employs 35 people and butchers a fair amount of the chicken consumed on Vancouver Island.

Opting for dinner at **Amusé Bistro**, regarded by many as Vancouver Island's best restaurant outside of Victoria, I wend my way through dark back roads into the tiny town of Shawnigan Lake. Amusé proves to be a romantic roadhouse with a deck enclosed by gauzy tenting and twinkling blue lights, an intimate upstairs dining room, and an even smaller downstairs bar. After a luscious little mushroom cappuccino (a complimentary *amuse bouche*), I order chicken forestière, with roasted carrots, leeks, and mushrooms over an eggplant-potato mash. The chicken is from—where else?—Lyle's farm. It harmonizes perfectly with a glass of Blue Grouse Bacchus, another white hybrid grape that grows exceptionally well here.

**Right: Fresh-baked loaves from True Grain Bread. Below: Amusé Bistro's tart of Hilary's Sacré Bleu cheese, white wine poached pears, candied local hazelnuts, Yellow Point cranberry jus, and Amusé garden lemon balm.**



COURTESY AMUSÉ BISTRO/MATTHEW HORN PHOTO

COURTESY TRUE GRAIN BREAD

## DAY 2. *Cream of the Crop*

Friday morning I stop in the village for pastry and a baguette at **True Grain Bread** and, right next door, some Sacré Bleu cheese from **Hilary's Cheese & Deli**.

Thus provisioned, I drive a short way to **Blue Grouse Estate Winery**, home of the wine I'd enjoyed at Amusé. Owner Hans Kiltz has run Blue Grouse as a 100% estate winery since 1989, making Bacchus, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Pinot Gris, and Pinot Noir from his own grapes. With his extremely local distribution, you probably won't taste his wine at all unless you're on Vancouver Island. Tasting room manager Nancy Waring, like many I meet in the Cowichan Valley, is a former Vancouverite who ditched the big city for an acre on the water near Cowichan Bay.

For my next stop, I cross the highway again for a tour of **Venturi-Schulze Vineyards** with its founder, Giordano Venturi. A born tinkerer, the energetic Giordano is always planting some new clone or varietal, or trying some new trellising approach. As good as his wines are, he is equally well-known for his balsamic vinegar, made precisely as it is made in his hometown of Modena, Italy. I'm amused to learn that he had never tasted real balsamic vinegar until he emigrated to Canada.

As he is showing us his vinegar barrels made from five kinds of wood, the Cittaslow dignitaries arrive. Given that Gian Luca ►

## PLACES TO STAY

### Affinity Guesthouse

5155 Samuel Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
866-748-7430  
affinityguesthouse.ca

### Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat & Guesthouse

3310 Jackson Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
250-746-4637  
fairburnfarm.bc.ca

### Oceanfront Grand Resort & Marina

1681 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
800-663-7898  
oceanfrontgrandresort.com

### Sooke Harbour House

(about 50 miles from Cowichan Bay)  
1528 Whiffen Spit Road  
Sooke, B.C.  
250-642-3421  
sookeharbourhouse.com

## PLACES TO EAT

### Amusé Bistro

1753 Shawnigan, Mill Bay Road  
Shawnigan Lake, B.C.  
250-743-3667  
amusebistro.com

### Cowichan Bay Farm

1560 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
250-746-7884  
cowichanbayfarm.com

### Drumroaster Coffee

1400 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cobble Hill, B.C.  
250-743-5200

### Hilary's Cheese & Deli

1737 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
250-748-5992  
hilarycheese.com

### The Masthead

1705 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
250-748-3714  
themastheadrestaurant.com

### Saison Market Vineyard

7575 Mays Road  
North Cowichan, B.C.  
250-597-0484

### True Grain Bread

1725 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
250-746-7664  
truegrain.ca

### The Udder Guy's Ice Cream Parlour

1759 Cowichan Bay Road  
Cowichan Bay, B.C.  
250-746-4300

## PLACES TO TASTE WINE

(and cider, and vinegar)

### Alderlea Vineyards

1751 Stamps Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
250-746-7122

### Averill Creek Vineyard

6552 North Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
250-709-9986  
averillcreek.ca

### Blue Grouse Estate Winery

4365 Blue Grouse Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
250-743-3834  
bluegrousevineyards.com

### Cherry Point Vineyards

840 Cherry Point Road  
Cobble Hill, B.C.  
250-743-1272  
cherrypointvineyards.com

### Merridale Ciderworks

1230 Merridale Road  
Cobble Hill, B.C.  
250-743-4293  
merridalecider.com

### Venturi-Schulze Vineyards

4235 Vineyard Road  
Cobble Hill, B.C.  
250-743-5630  
venturischulze.com

### Zanatta Winery

5039 Marshall Road  
Duncan, B.C.  
250-748-2338  
zanatta.ca



Blue netting at Blue Grouse Vineyards helps protect against fruit-nabbing birds.

ANGIE JANINE PHOTO

## Special Attractions

### Cowichan Wine & Culinary Festival September 2010

Over two days, the wineries and farms of the Cowichan region attract wine and culinary aficionados to experience firsthand the best of Vancouver Island wines, culinary excellence, and original music and art. For more information, visit [wines.cowichan.net](http://wines.cowichan.net).

### Feast of Fields September 2010

Enjoy gourmet organic food at this annual picnic festival. The region's best chefs, farmers, winemakers, and bakers celebrate the harvest with events at three different locations across British Columbia, including the Okanagan, Lower Mainland, and Vancouver Island. For more information, visit [ffcprojects.ca/feast/](http://ffcprojects.ca/feast/).

Don is a CBC Radio food personality who lives in Cobble Hill, another small community on Vancouver Island: he is also the convivium leader of Slow Food Vancouver Island. Lori Iannidinardo is Cowichan Bay's elected Regional Director. She got her start as a food activist by teaching cooking to local low-income families. Unlike many I've met this weekend, Lori grew up here. She says she championed Cowichan Bay's special Cittaslow status because "I always knew this was a place to cherish."

Having just met Dwight Milford and Vanessa Elton, a delightful young pair of innkeepers who were helping flip the pancakes, I arrange to visit them after breakfast. It's a ten-minute drive to their **Affinity Guesthouse**, which sits on a 22-acre bay-front property covered with fruit trees and teeming with wild swans and eagles. Vanessa's parents built the house in 1990 as a vacation home, but you'd swear it had been there for decades. Inside, a couple of visitors are relaxing with the paper and enjoying the view of fields and marshes. Vanessa and Dwight met as environmental activists, and Dwight likes nothing better than to paddle his guests via kayak from Affinity across Cowichan's bay for dinner at **The Masthead** restaurant, a favorite with local

Marconi is from Modena, there is much hugging and exclaiming in Italian before we all repair to the Venturi-Schulze tasting room, where with cries of "Salute!" we hoist glasses of the winery's 2007 Brut Naturel, a dosage-free blend of Pinot Auxerrois, Pinot Gris, and Kerner (another hybrid).

By this time the sun is heading towards the horizon, but **Zanatta Winery** is just fifteen minutes away, so I make one last winery stop before calling it a day. It's a lovely place, said to be Vancouver Island's first commercial vineyard, with its first plantings in 1981. The highlight of the tasting flight is definitely the Glenora Fantasia Brut, made from 100% Cayuga grapes. A close runner-up is Damasco, a non-vintage white blend that includes Madeline Sylvaner, Ortega, Muscat, and Auxerrois.

Back in Cow Bay, I make myself a picnic supper of the morning's cheese and bread, and indulge in a scoop of **The Udder Guy's** mandarin orange-chocolate ice cream from their parlor on the main drag. All their ice creams are made with Vancouver Island cream and are outrageously rich.

### DAY 3. *Wake Up and Smell the Pancakes*

Saturday morning dawns sunny and dry, and I stroll down the now-familiar main drag to the community pancake breakfast, a fundraiser for Cittaslow. As I devour Red Fife wheat pancakes with Saskatoon berries, maple syrup, and Cowichan Bay sausage, I chat with First Nations artist Herb Rice about the totem he carved for the Native American Indigenous Games, held in Cowichan Bay in 2008.

I also meet Bruce Stewart, owner of True Grain Bread and president of Cittaslow Cowichan Bay. He had been a business executive in Toronto and Calgary, but he and his wife Leslie wanted to raise their family in a small community, and when they had a chance to buy True Grain from its founder, they didn't hesitate. The bakery still mills its own local, organic heritage grains, including spelt and Red Fife wheat.

Two more key Cittaslow supporters are here, Don Genova and Lori Iannidinardo.

Plein air breakfast grilling.



ANGIE JABINE PHOTO

winemakers.

With a fond goodbye to Affinity, I head to the farm where Hilary's Cheese is made—today it is also one of the sites of the Cowichan Valley Wine & Culinary Festival. I line up for a taste of garlic, honey, and pepper-flavored cheeses. Hilary Abbott is quick to tell me his is not strictly an estate cheese operation ("Maybe one day," he says), but he assures me his milk comes "from cows milked on Thursday" in nearby Cobble Hill.

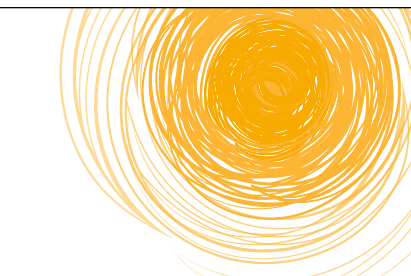
Under a bright afternoon sun, I push onward to Alderlea Vineyards in Duncan, a twenty-minute drive north of Cowichan Bay Village. A sign marking their road is missing, but I double back and drive in. Roger Dosman, his wife Nancy, their three-year-old granddaughter Clarissa, and a cat named Sox are there to greet me.

Roger is forthright, with the confidence of a well-regarded, self-taught winemaker who has little trouble hand-selling his 2,000 cases a year. Like so many I've met this weekend, he's a self-described refugee from the lower mainland. His wine is from 100% estate grapes: the '06 "Clarinet" is made of Maréchal Foch, while an '06 Fusion features a new-to-Canada cross of Cabernet Sauvignon and Foch intended for early ripening. His '06 Reserve Pinot Noir is made with grapes from his oldest plantings: it's smooth-bodied, with lovely aromas and flavors of dark cherry, cassis, allspice, and leather. If you want to try it, you'll have to trek to Alderlea, or at least to Victoria, where many wine shops carry it.

Feeling famished, I'm excited to be headed south to Merridale Ciderworks,

where I have a reservation to dine at the on-site bistro, la Pommerai. One of the loveliest places in the entire Cowichan Valley, Merridale also earns high marks for its hard ciders; its "traditional" version has been called the best English-style cider in Canada. It was my favorite of the flight I tasted, but hardcore cider enthusiasts favor Merridale's "Scrumpy," with its 11% alcohol and faintly funky aroma.

With its light-filled tasting bar opening onto a heated, multi-tiered deck surrounded by orchards, Merridale is indeed magical. The setting sun casts an ambient glow on every apple. A breeze whips up, and servers distribute cozy blankets to anyone feeling a chill. It's hard to stay chilly, though, as I'm warmed by an "Arabian Nights" feast and the gyrations of four belly dancers of the Al Ahsan troupe from nearby Sidney. After a perfect dessert of brick-oven chocolate spice cake with apricot jelly, I'm well fortified for the drive back to the Oceanfront. ▶



# orange moon MARKETING

## Spring Release is just around the corner.

strategic counsel | branding

identity | media relations

✦ events | websites/social media

for the food + wine industry

503.504.2125  
ORANGEMOONMARKETING.COM



"Art isn't everything.  
It's just about everything."

Gertrude Stein

Whether you're a cultural traveler or a weekend enthusiast, The Listel Hotel's art-infused atmosphere and perfect location on the city's most vibrant street guarantees a memorable visit. High design, personal service, original art, live jazz and exceptional food and wine all complete the scene.



[thelistelhotel.com](http://thelistelhotel.com)

604 684.8461

1 800 663.5491

1300 Robson Street  
Vancouver BC Canada

# THE LISTEL HOTEL

Vancouver, Canada



## DAY 4. *A Feast of a Finale*

Sunday brings yet another perfect, cloudless September day. This morning takes me north again, past Duncan, to **Averill Creek Vineyard**, one of the newest and fanciest of the Cowichan Valley wineries. The building is a knockout and so is the site, with a sliver of Cowichan Bay visible on the far horizon.

On the patio, Ingrid Lehwald is doing a brisk business selling freshly baked artisan breads. Ingrid grew up in Mill Bay and her husband is Frédéric Desbiens, who has cooked at Lumière in Vancouver and Domaine de Chaberton Estate Winery's Bacchus Bistro in Langley. She tells me they're opening **Saison Market Vineyard** in North Cowichan, where they've planted nine acres of Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, and Pinot Noir to sell to local wineries. The couple will also sell veggies picked fresh from their garden, homemade preserves, and assorted baked goods at their on-site farmers market stand; plus, weekends they'll host brunch service in their twenty-seat café, with additional seating on an expansive patio. Clearly, they're settling in.

In the tasting room, I meet Averill Creek's owners, Andy and Wendy Johnston, who hail from Edmonton, Alberta. Andy pours me some Pinot Gris and a dry, complex '08 Rosé blend of Maréchal Foch, Pinot Noir, and Merlot with a long, pleasant finish. A former physician, he itched to make his own Pinot Noir, and his wife, a banker, agreed ("She's the money," he says with a laugh). He rejected the Okanagan Valley as not ideally suited for Pinot, did some serious scouting for acreage in New Zealand, but in the end placed all his bets on Vancouver Island.

Once I've finished the crush pad tour with Averill Creek's winemaker, Daniel Dragert (a Vancouver Island boy who was trained in New Zealand), the sun is high in the sky. A ten-minute drive east takes me to Providence Farm for the climax of this Cittaslow weekend, **Feast of Fields**.

If anything epitomizes the local food sentiment, it is this twelve-year-old benefit for the nonprofit FarmFolk CityFolk, which funds local greenhouses, gleanings, and other



Local foods highlight the Vancouver Island Feast of Fields.

ANGIE JABINE PHOTO

food-related projects. Spread out before me are food and wine purveyors serving up bits of heaven from all over Vancouver Island. My favorite? Cured Sooke trout with quince chutney and black sticky rice, wrapped in sheets of Umi Nami Farm greens, from Camille's in Victoria. Or maybe it's the Masthead's Providence Farm pork sandwich, made with True Grain's Vancouver Island wheat roll.

A blissful hour passes on the front lawn before I wander behind the main building to see still more vendors, including Mara Jernigan, who is serving blinis. She also brought along an eleven-day-old water buffalo heifer. Cowichan Valley's water buffaloes are a saga in themselves, as their arrival some years ago coincided with the global mad cow crisis, and every adult in the first herd was destroyed. Today, however, the herd has grown to 40. Their milk is sold to Natural Pastures, a heritage dairy farm in Courtenay, for authentic fresh mozzarella.

Across the way from Mara stands none other than Frederique Philip of **Sooke Harbour House**, the legendary inn just west of Victoria. Her blouse is adorned with a truly resplendent fresh wild mushroom, which captures my gaze as she hands me an Indian celery cone filled with foraged mushroom salad, smoked goat's milk crème fraîche, and oxalis greens. This festival is positively one of a kind.

But now, it's time for me to head back home. Under no circumstances will I be speeding down the highway, though—I am overflowing with Cowichan Bay's "Cittaslow" spirit.



Angie Jabine is the Portland bureau chief of *nwstir.com*.

sample the delights of

# Cowichan VALLEY

*True Grain Bread*

Cowichan Bay Village

An unparalleled bread experience



An olde-world bakehouse at the heart of the seaside village where the art of the miller and baker are honed and cherished. Linger a while amidst the unforgettable aroma of our organic handcrafted breads.



250-746-7664 truegrain.ca