

Island wines worth a trip

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As much as skill, it takes guts to launch a wine and food festival.

Even more so if your timing falls slap bang in the middle of a steamy summer in a year when tourism numbers are -- to be kind -- soft.

But Kathy McAree saw no such impediment when she approached the movers and shakers of the provincial capital to launch Taste -- which turned out to be a very timely salute to the blossoming food and wine culture of Vancouver Island. Through her company Travel with Taste, McAree has developed contacts with the broad network of Island and Gulf Island producers of every kind, many of whom were showcased in the aptly named Main Event at Crystal Garden.

While Okanagan wineries were also involved in the three-day program, for this event they were located upstairs in the airy atrium, allowing the Islanders to shine in their own spotlight.

Islanders, by nature, possess a dogged individuality. It's a trait that has stood them well, as evidenced, for example, by the Wine Islands Vintners Association, whose website [HYPERLINK "http://www.wineislands.ca" www.wineislands.ca](http://www.wineislands.ca) now lists 34 wineries, mead and cider makers -- a far cry from the three brave Cowichan Valley wineries who took the plunge in the early '90s.

Most striking about this extravaganza compared to previous island events was not only the range of products on offer (from ciders to fruit wines and spirits) but the overall consistency and quality of even some more esoteric items.

Due to the cooler climate and need to work with earlier ripening varieties, wineries in particular have been obliged to branch out on their own. For the early experimenters, things are now certainly paying off: even much maligned Marechal Foch (long forsaken by the Okanagan) is starting to prove its worth (and respectability) now that vines have come of age. Just taste Starling Lane '07, Averill Creek Prevost '07, or Alderlea Clarinet '06 and you'll see what we mean. Pinot, too, gets a nod, especially Averill Creek '07, and Garry Oaks '07.

Leading a charge of "Island Champions," chosen and presented by B.C. wine guru John Schreiner, was the remarkably Champagne-like Salt Spring Island Vineyards Morning Star 2005 -- the main reason, say new owners Dev and Joanne McIntyre, "that we bought the winery!" You'll probably wish you'd bought it too if you ever get to taste this completely dry, deliciously vinous sparkler. (More to come on Island wines in a later column.)

More discoveries? Good ciders can be hard to find, particularly in B.C., where nowadays any old apple seems to do. Where I come from they used to sing a ditty, "I grew up in Zummerzet, where the zoider apples grow," or something like that, so we like to think we know at least little bit about how truly good cider should taste.

Sea Ciders range of premium bottle fermented ciders -- a "must taste" for any serious cider aficionado -- include the respectably drier style Pippins, the very food friendly, almost prosecco-like, Kings & Spies, and the intriguingly spicy, rum-barrel aged Rumrunner. They're not cheap

but if you sip (as in wine) rather than quaff them, no problem. Find them at PWS such as Liberty and Everything Wine. Check out their equally stellar web site at HYPERLINK "http://www.seacider.ca" www.seacider.ca.

Spreading their wings here too were the Islands' new sipping distilleries, including Hornby's Phrog, and Victoria Gin, as well as MooBerry -- the fruit winery that's sprung up at Little Qualicum Cheeseworks -- whose straight ahead drops include a true-to-form, pink gooseberry.

There's more, of course, indeed, we suspect, plenty more to come, from a region where "esoteric" and "eclectic" are the rule rather than the exception -- and a welcome one at that. Much of this bounty is hard to find (if even available) on the Lower Mainland, as Islanders support their own with a passion that's rewarding to see. So, it goes without saying that if you are Islands-bound this summer, you owe it to yourself to take a day to explore. And if you're looking for a guide, HYPERLINK "http://www.travelwithtaste.com" www.travelwithtaste.com is good place to start.