



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES KURCZABA
STYLISTS: SWIZZLESTICKS SALONSPA,
HAIR: BRIANNA HALLET,
MAKEUP: REBECCA WHITE
MODEL: SHANNON, AW MODELS
FASHION: BCBG MAX AZRIA

It's no secret that Alberta is known for its high quality beef; if you've taken a look at some menus around town, you'll also find that our Taber corn is a hit, as are our juicy Hotchkiss tomatoes, Poplar Bluff potatoes and free-range bison. However, what you may not know, is that we also make our own wine—fruit wine, that is. Ontario, B.C. and even Nova Scotia, may have their grapes, but here in Alberta, we're making wines with the likes of saskatoons and rhubarb.

Bottoms Up

Discover Field
Stone Fruit Wines,
a true taste of Alberta
BY LAURA PELLERINE



Where to find it in Calgary:

Calgary Farmers' Market,
Thursdays to Sundays
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Kingsland Farmers' Market,
Thursdays to Sundays
(7711 Macleod Tr S)

**Grassroots Northlands
Farmers' Market,**
Tuesdays
(Northland Village Mall,
5111 Northland Dr NW)

Buy online:
www.fieldstonefruitwines.com

The first "vineyard" to put Alberta on the winery map was Field Stone Fruit Wines. Owned and operated by husband-and-wife team Marvin and Elaine Gill, and family members Lynden Gill, Lorraine and Glen Ellingson, the winery sits on 50 acres of berry farmland just outside of Strathmore, 40 minutes east of Calgary. Sitting in the middle of flat prairie land as far as the eye can see, the winery seems to come out of nowhere. Marvin and Elaine live on site, amongst rows of blooming saskatoon bushes, gopher holes and their "guard dog"—a nine-year-old, sweet-natured Sheltie named Tessa.

Marvin and Elaine got the idea to start the winery back in 2002, when there wasn't legislation in place for a cottage winery. They had been running U-Pick berry farm Bumbleberry Orchards for five years, when their crop yields grew too large. "About that time, the Fruit Growers Association began working with Alberta Agriculture to look into establishing a cottage winery industry in Alberta," Marvin explains. "We thought that would be a good fit for us."

Marvin, along with a group of other local growers, began lobbying their MLAs and the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) to create regulations that would allow the Alberta wine industry to exist and grow. He helped establish requirements like all fruit used in Alberta wine must be from Alberta, orchards must operate on a minimum of five acres, and that winemakers use 75 per cent of their own produce. In 2005, Marvin and his team were finally given the green light.

While he was happy to get started, he admits that it brought along its own kind of pressure. "We were excited for the opportunity and possibility, but also a bit apprehensive over whether the product would be something to be proud of and be sellable."

Marvin readily confesses that, at the time, he knew nothing about the actual winemaking process. "One of the most important, decisions we made that first year was to hire one of the top fruit wine makers in the world, Dominic Rivard." Rivard, the founding director of Fruit Wines of Canada Association, has won hundreds of awards and medals in national and international wine competitions. Originally hailing from Quebec, he has cider-makers in his ancestry, and he himself began experimenting with making wine at the age of 17.

The first year was a mix of trial and error as Rivard

taught Marvin how to make wine. Marvin recalls a time when he learned the hard way that his double-insulated steel tank wasn't going to work for wine making. "I once left raspberries in it, and when I came back to check on them 12 hours later, there was foam all over the ground. I wanted to get down and start slurping it up," he laughs. "Finally, I learned that we had to use plastic tanks, as they're better for cooling." Rivard also taught him the delicate science of weighing and balancing acidic levels, and how to create a wine with depth. Their first batch of Bumble Berry, for instance, was made from strawberries, raspberries, and saskatoons, but it was Rivard who suggested adding the finishing flavour of rhubarb.

Marvin also quickly learned that hiring 14-year-olds to pick the berries wasn't going to work—they weren't able to pick fast enough. Sounding almost like an act of divine intervention, he remembers the day when the solution revealed itself. "We were sitting here wondering, 'What are we going to do? There's pounds of raspberries out there.' All of a sudden, this van pulls up with a Hutterite couple inside, asking if we'd like to have our berries picked. They showed up the next day with 25 women, and picked the whole lot in one day. I couldn't keep up with them."

Since that day, Field Stone has maintained a working relationship with the Cluny colony. Hutterite workers pick, plant and even bottle the wine. Like a well-oiled machine, during the bottling process, a group of young women dressed in full-length printed dresses, aprons and head covers can rinse, fill, cork and box as many as 270 cases a day—once in a pinch, Marvin recalls, they did 700. They



don't enjoy any one part of the process more than the other. "We're just happy to get to work together," Diane, a friendly girl with glasses, says.

Currently in Field Stone's roster are five fruit wines and five dessert fruit wines, with flavours ranging from wild black cherry to raspberry, saskatoon to black currant, and combinations in between. They started off with 10,000 bottles, and are now making up to 45,000 bottles a year.

After his initial apprehension, it turns out that Marvin didn't have much to worry about. Field Stone Fruit Wines has been decorated with 25 medals from wine competitions (nine this year alone), with every flavour winning a distinction of honour. The most notable perhaps, are the gold medals for the Bumble Berry and Strawberry-Rhubarb fruit wines, and the "Best of Type" for the Black Currant Dessert Wine, at the 2010 Northwest Wine Summit. The competition includes participants across Canada and the U.S.

One of the secrets to their success Marvin says, is starting with a great-tasting fruit grown by biological farming principles. This method includes using non-harmful fertilizers, herbicides instead of pesticides, organic matter to improve the soil, tilling to control weeds, and testing to ensure the soil is properly balanced with the right nutrients. "Our wines are a little more on the fruity side," Marvin explains. "Not

necessarily sweet, but fruity. We like to keep the character of the berries."


This type of farming also means that when wild animals come out to explore the orchard, Marvin lets them be.

"We have a family of about five deer that like to chomp on our cherry bushes, but that's just part of the ecosystem." He also says they have visits from the likes of moose, bunnies, coyotes and even the odd bear.

It's difficult for Marvin to pick a favourite wine. "Every time I taste one, I think, I really, really like this. But I guess I have a special place in my heart for the Bumble Berry because it was our first. Also, it's very versatile, white meats, burgers, sangrias—it's so yummy."

The winery offers tours to the public during the summer. Visitors are welcome to do some wine tasting, see where the berries are grown, meet Tessa, and the owners. Those who are city-locked can pick up a bottle at farmers' markets across the province.

"It's not a romantic life, it's a lot of work," Marvin says, as he walks past a plot of strawberry plants, just starting to peak out of the ground. "But life is about enjoying your time, and if you love what you're doing, all the better. We want to make the best wine we can, and try to keep it growing."

In July & August, tours run Thursday to Sunday, 10 am - 6 pm, for directions head to www.fieldstonefruitwines.com. 

(Top, left) Just starting to bloom, Field Stone has 30 acres of saskatoon berries. (Centre) Hutterite workers happily bottle hundreds of cases a day. (Bottom, centre) Field Stone grows 90 per cent of its own fruit. (Top, right) The Black Currant is a slightly tart, medium-dry wine that pairs well with grilled chicken.

