

Similkameen Valley coming on strong

by PETER MITHAM

VANCOUVER - Long touted as the organic farming capital of Canada, the Similkameen is on the verge of rivaling the Okanagan and Cowichan valleys as a destination for culinary travelers in the know.

"It's still an area that's largely undiscovered by the general populace," said Eric Pateman of Edible British Columbia, a culinary tour and events organizer based in Vancouver.

Pateman organized a dinner at Vancouver's Raincity Grill restaurant last Fall that showcased some of the valley's bounty, from fruit and vegetables to bread and wine. For many producers, the dinner marked their formal debut in the Lower Mainland.

John and Virginia Weber of Orofino Vineyards in Cawston benefited from the attention received earlier this year for their winery built from bales of straw - an energy-efficient and sustainable construction technique - but the Raincity dinner was a chance to meet potential aficionados in the Lower Mainland.

That's important, given that they've limited sales of their wines to an on-site shop and select restaurants. Having sold out of the seven wines in their initial release, they're looking to the future.

"We've created that demand," John Weber said. "I like the fact that people are looking for it."

"The past year's releases, including wines from the 2003 and 2004 harvests, amounted to just 550 cases but this fall's crush will yield about 850 cases. John Weber hopes to eventually boost production to between 1,500 to 2,000 cases, small enough for Orofino's wines to remain unique but sufficient to supply those who want the wines.

Though Orofino currently supplements its own production with grapes from the Okanagan, Weber hopes to produce wines made solely from Similkameen grapes within three years.

For Weber, being just that much out of reach helps drive demand.

"Product scarcity- if it truly is a good product - naturally increases demand and there is nothing wrong with creating an excitement that will make the consumer look for a wine release," Weber said.

Wineries in the valley are also hoping to undertake a joint marketing campaign, an initiative that promises to boost sales of local wines as well as foster tourism-related opportunities for other growers and entrepreneurs.

But the Similkameen remains a long way from becoming the tourist mecca the Okanagan has become

The Similkameen is five to 15 years from seeing any sort of major resort development, Pateman said, thanks to the lack of year-round traffic that sustains the Okanagan tourist trade.

While there are some good bed and breakfasts, Pateman said it's often easier to pick up produce at one of the local farmers' stands and make dinner from scratch.