

magazine

11·FALL



THE 2012 C-CLASS COUPE
Two-door style and performance



AT HOME ON THE RANGE
The rugged M-Class gets back to its roots



MERCEDES-BENZ START UP
A boost for Canadian fashion

SLS AMG ROADSTER Close to heaven
E-CLASS Timeless reliability
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Rural Rebirth

Ontario's Prince Edward County – its wines, culinary scene and charming country setting – has captured the imaginations of some of this country's most devoted urbanites.

WORDS NATASHA MEKHAIL PHOTOS RICHMOND LAM



The 2012 CLS-Class rounds the bend in front of the Merrill Inn.

PHOTO (BOTTOM RIGHT): NATASHA MEKHAIL

“Prince Edward County reinvents itself once a generation,” says a County-dwelling acquaintance. He and his wife, former Bay Street financiers turned professional *bons vivants*, are part of a demographic increasingly referred to as “the rurbanites,” those high-performance city dwellers who give it all up to start a hobby farm, tend grapes or open the restaurant of their dreams in the countryside. The current reinvention he’s referring to is the bucolic County’s transformation from a summertime beach hot spot on Lake Ontario to Canada’s fastest-growing wine region and a year-round destination for inventive field-to-table culinary experiences.

When I last visited PEC in the early 1990s, dinner was pizza and Cokes at a family restaurant. Wine was served out of a box. Now as I cruise east on the 401 in the 2012 CLS-Class, sinking into the leather seat and watching the urban environment give way to sprawling fields, I wonder what new charm has lured some of Toronto’s most confirmed urbanites to these rural townships two hours away.

PEC’s metamorphosis is visible immediately as I pull onto Highway 33, which weaves through the historic towns of Wellington, Bloomfield and Picton. It’s late fall and the main streets, rather than being deserted after the summer season, teem with activity. The curio shops of old are gone, replaced with chic boutiques, airy coffee shops and intimate modern bistros.

Everywhere the trees explode with colour, from crisp yellows to deep crimsons. People load cartons of squash, apples and pumpkins into the trunks of their cars. The atmosphere is celebratory, and it takes a minute for my urban mind to process the reason why: It’s harvest time.

Finally in Picton, I pull up in front of the Merrill Inn, a Gothic brick mansion ornamented with beaming white gableboards. If it’s not made of gingerbread, it should be. Inside, I’m greeted by Edward Shubert, another rurbanite, who along with his wife and business partner, Amy, ran hotels in Florida before settling here.

My room is a gorgeous blend of antique

furnishings and modern comforts, including a sleigh bed, fireplace and luxurious soaker tub. While the Shuberts practise old-world hospitality, they also have a very fresh take on the hotel business. The in-room amenities, from hand soaps to lotions, are created locally using natural ingredients and County lavender. On the walls is a rotating selection of strikingly modern artworks by local painters.

A further innovative move was the recruitment of renowned chef Michael Sullivan to run The Restaurant at the Merrill Inn. Sullivan, whose resumé includes such Toronto institutions as The Fifth, Auberge du Pommier, Opus and Matisse, lends an urban sensibility to this restaurant but spurns the stuffiness. The wine list has won a *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence for the last six years, and Sullivan’s dishes – including tonight’s menu of ricotta and lemon gnocchi, milk-fed veal escalopes and white-wine poached pear tart – are simple, fresh and elegant.

Upstairs, the bed is turned down and the lamp glows softly. On the pillow sits an individually wrapped gingerbread cookie – baked in the shape of the Merrill Inn.



Harvest vegetables in the garden of Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co.





The next morning, another sparkling autumn day awaits – perfect for wine touring. There is one stop to make first, however, at the Claramount Inn & Spa. Set in another stunning Victorian manor, this one painted a bright sunny yellow, the spa is well known for its blend of traditional and avant-garde services – among them, the *lomi lomi* massage. This Hawaiian tradition (*lomi lomi* translates as “loving touch”) is often described not as a massage, but as an experience. As therapist Brandy Monro explains, she doesn’t work the body in the traditional order (upper back, lower back, legs, arms, shoulders), but instead moves by feel and intuition to concentrate on whichever areas need the most attention moment to moment. “When the mind lets go, the body will follow,” she says. “You will receive the massage on a deeper level.”

Slow guitar music flows from the speakers and, in a series of rhythmic motions, Monro begins kneading my back with her forearm and

elbow. Suddenly the music changes to upbeat electronica and her movements follow suit. The massage continues for 90 minutes amid several frenetic musical changes. But she’s right: Under the influence of her fluid kneading and carefully chosen acoustic selections, my mind drifts far, far away from everyday concerns and work-related stresses. I feel truly relaxed.

Harvest Wine

It’s in that semi-euphoric state that I climb back into the CLS-Class and head out on the road to wine country. At Bloomfield the route forks north on Highway 62. The sun is high in the sky, catching the gold on the tall grasses that line the road and reflecting them on the car’s long, sloping silver hood. On several occasions a low-flying blue jay or bright red cardinal makes a dive just ahead. Such a rarity in the city, these cheerful Crayola-coloured birds are everywhere here.

Ten minutes outside of Picton, the first stop

is Huff Estates Winery. Not only does this vineyard produce award-winning wines, particularly its Gamays, Rieslings and Chardonnays, it is also famous for its modernist architecture and neighbouring contemporary art gallery.

The winery itself, a Napa-esque minimalist structure of concrete and glass, is nestled against a hillside. Next door, the Oeno Gallery is similarly austere, surrounded by a wind-sculpture garden. These fantastical modern-art forms spin on their many axes, producing a haunting symphony. Inside, a carefully edited selection of artwork recalls the contemporary galleries of Toronto and New York, but without mimicking them. Instead, the curator’s excellent taste speaks for itself.

The winery shop is abuzz with guests sampling the varietals, but the prize nectar today is the 2006 Cuvée Peter F. Huff, winner of the 2010 All Canadian Wine Championships award for best sparkling – incredible, since the 2004 was

Huff Estates’ (not to mention the County’s) first foray into traditional-method bubbly. Its successor does not disappoint: The creamy texture and pert acidity followed by a lingering sweetness are enough to convince me to take a bottle home for my next celebration.

From Huff Estates I follow County Road 1, then detour down some of the interesting-looking byways en route to the next stop on the wine trail. The road leads past farmhouses converted into artist studios, a barn selling oversize kitchen tables made of reclaimed wood (their maker a former Vancouver real estate developer who caught County fever a decade ago), a farm gate stand offering homemade preserves (it’s unmanned, save for a tin cash box and the honour system).

Such meandering can easily stretch the 15-minute drive to over an hour. When I finally pull up at the Norman Hardie Winery & Vineyard, I find its tasting room housed

ICE ICE, BABY

WORDS NEAL MCLENNAN

In Canada, the bottling of the first icewines in the 1970s turned a still-nascent wine industry that didn’t even rate into a global force to be reckoned with seemingly overnight. By 1991, a Canadian icewine had earned the prestigious Grand Prix d’Honneur at Vinexpo – the equivalent of winning the Indy 500 shortly after getting your driver’s licence. Since then, Canadian icewine has gone on to dominate the world market, accounting for nearly 75 percent of all production. And while it will never be a mass-market product (it takes roughly 10 times more grapes than regular wines, and they must be harvested when the temperature is at a sustained -8°C), Canada is leading the way in new techniques that will expand the market. Use these four bottlings as a road map to the future.



INNISKILLIN OKANAGAN TEMPRANILLO ICEWINE 2008, \$100

For aficionados who think they’ve tried everything, this wine from the company’s Okanagan vineyards takes Tempranillo – the quintessential Spanish hot-climate grape – and applies some sustained cold weather to create a rose-coloured vintage that is radically unique.

TASTING NOTES: spicy cherries, raspberry jam and tobacco with subtle citrus tones.



HILLIER CREEK ESTATES VIDAL ICEWINE 2007, \$45

One of the best offerings from Prince Edward County has been wowing critics with a finesse and balance that are remarkable for a first vintage. Vidal produces a more traditional icewine, so expect a future classic.

TASTING NOTES: waves of honey and apricot, combined with a bracing acidity.



DOMAINE DE GRAND PRÉ MUSCAT ICEWINE 2009, \$29.50 (200 ML)

This wine from Nova Scotia is surprisingly good and uses the floral Muscat grape to great effect, proving that icewine doesn’t have one locale or one varietal under which it can flourish.

TASTING NOTES: creamy papaya and peach.



REIF ESTATE 2008 CABERNET FRANC ICEWINE, \$29.95 (200 ML)

In just a few years, the Right Bank Bordeaux staple, Cabernet Franc, has morphed from being a grape used to produce a novelty icewine into a serious contender. This innovative vintage offers a good indication of where the industry is heading.

TASTING NOTES: garnet colour and a taste reminiscent of a fresh-baked strawberry-rhubarb pie, with a few raspberries thrown in.



Chef Michael Sullivan behind the scenes of The Restaurant at the Merrill Inn.



Tall Poppy Café



From the Farm Cooking School's Cynthia Peters (centre).



County map at Buddha Dog.



Buddha Dogs made entirely of PEC-sourced ingredients.



COME DRIVE WITH ME

Master the roads of Prince Edward County – or wherever your journeys take you – after you complete a thrilling Mercedes-Benz Driving Academy session. Operating in cities from coast-to-coast, the Mercedes-Benz Driving Academy offers three different informative courses throughout the year. Expert instruction and immediate feedback is provided by some of the most qualified and experienced facilitators, trainers and advanced-driving instructors in the industry, while the fleet of 12 cars offers the chance to test drive a broad range of Mercedes-Benz vehicles, including some AMG models. With no car sharing in any program, you're guaranteed maximum time behind the wheel while performing complex drills and learning advanced techniques that will sharpen your driving skills. Select from one of three sessions:

WINTER DRIVING ACADEMY – A full-day lesson on how to handle adverse winter driving conditions. Participants learn advanced concepts in steering, vision and vehicle control. Exercises include: braking techniques, skid control and high-speed emergency lane changes.

DRIVING EXPERIENCE – An introductory half-day course that teaches new and intermediate drivers how to deal with, and avoid, emergency situations. Through a brief classroom session and hands-on practice, participants become more confident with their abilities. Topics include seating and hand positioning, proper use of pedals, mirror adjustment, forward vision, vehicle dynamics and Mercedes-Benz technologies.

MASTERING PERFORMANCE – A full-day program designed for novices and enthusiasts alike. Participants learn how to apply advanced driving techniques – such as how vision, weight transfer and the use of controls affect vehicle behaviour – in an exciting racetrack environment. The day includes a Q&A session, advanced group exercises and several laps around the track.

All programs come with a continental breakfast and/or lunch, refreshments and one-on-one time with instructors. Fees range from \$395 to \$1,595. Download the registration form and to find out when the Academy is coming to you.

MERCEDES-BENZ.CA/DRIVINGACADEMY

in an ultra-modern corrugated-steel structure shaped cheekily like a barn. The young New Zealander behind the counter offers me a splash of the 2008 Prince Edward County Chardonnay and I fall instantly in love with its toasty and buttery notes, its big flavour providing a perfect transition from summer's whites to winter's reds.

With the taste of the terroir on my mind, I take a harvest-hued drive through Ameliasburg to From the Farm Cooking School. The proprietor of this heritage farmhouse dating back to the 1830s is personal chef, food writer and city defector Cynthia Peters. Today, this co-founder of Toronto's personal-chef enterprise, The Spice Sisters, invites small groups into her state-of-the-art country kitchen. Here, she not only teaches visitors how to prepare delicious seasonal meals, she also takes them on County tours to pick up the ingredients straight from the producers.

Instead of a tour, we're joined by Victoria Rose of Long Dog Winery, a former Imax film producer turned vintner, who pulls up in a mint-con-

dition 1980 Mercedes-Benz 300 CD coupe.

The day's menu is written in a beautiful hand on a large blackboard in the kitchen: crostini with white bean, lemon and herb spread; homemade ravioli with local chèvre and mushrooms in a brown butter sage sauce; roasted pork loin with arugula pesto. Before long, the three of us are laughing, talking wines and pushing dough through a hand-cranked pasta roller, warmed by the sunlight streaming in the panoramic windows of the breakfast room. When the meal is ready, we're joined by Peters' partner Brian Ford, the CFO of a local business, who's been quietly working in his home office at the back of the house. In the waning light, around their large dining-room table, we toast to new friends and the beautiful meal laid out before us.

Sands of Time

Now it's time for a little nostalgia. In Wellington, I make a pit stop at the Tall Poppy Café to fill a go cup with aromatic direct-trade Phil & Sebastian coffee and pick up a selection of fluffy fresh-baked

pastries. These, along with a beach blanket, go into the CLS's 63 AMG spacious trunk and I set a course for Sandbanks Provincial Park.

Only a 15-minute drive from Wellington lies the PEC of old: the long stretch of beach on Lake Ontario and the uncanny sand dunes that give the park their name. At the top of one of these, I lay out my breakfast picnic, read the paper in its entirety and watch the gulls dance on the water's edge. I can't remember when last I spent a morning like this.

Back in Picton I collect my things from the Merrill Inn and am about to get back on the highway when I remember the stop that all visitors to the County must make: Buddha Dog. In the summer, this place can have lineups down the street, but it's thankfully quiet at lunchtime today. The shop gets its name from the joke "What did Buddha say to the hotdog vendor? Make me one with everything."

On the wall, a large hand-drawn map of the County reveals the secret of these special dogs: The buns are baked by The Pastry House, the

PHOTO: NATASHA MEKHAIL (MAP)