

Dutch treat for improbable Fraser Canyon estate winery

by CAM FORTEMS

LILLOOET – A Dutch family has traded the office towers and tabletop landscape of the Netherlands for the looming Coast mountains, incandescent sunshine and soil it hopes will produce a vineyard in Lillooet.

And with the move to the Fraser Canyon, the de Bruin family is pioneering establishment of a vineyard in a region conventionally thought unsuitable.

Earlier this summer, Rolf de Bruin and Heleen Pannekoek planted eight hectares of wine grapes – the beginning of Fort Berens Estate Winery on the Fraser Canyon.

“We think we have the best spot in the valley to grow grapes,” said Pannekoek, who by mid-June was inserting bamboo sticks beside the newly planted vines and sheltering them by putting milk-carton sleeves over top.

While the Okanagan valley has been home to vineyards for decades and produces quality wines for export, few entrepreneurs have strayed outside the safe confines of the hot and arid region. While other areas, including the Thompson Valley and Fraser Canyon, have sufficient heat units, both regions are colder in winter.

Government grant helped

The roots of Lillooet’s nascent commercial vineyard and winery were planted three years ago by community advocates using a government grant.

Test plots were planted at a few sites in the valley by volunteers and landowners. Christ’l Roshard, former mayor of Lillooet, made her land available in 2005.

While Roshard’s father and others planted grapes in the valley decades ago, experiments with commercially viable, yet fragile, vinifera vines were never done.

Last winter’s early and bitter cold that lasted into March put those vines planted three years ago to the test. Roshard said some Okanagan growers lost 30 per cent of their vines to cold damage.

“We probably lost 30 per cent of our plants as well. It happens every 30 years maybe.”

De Bruin and Pannekoek traveled to Canada a decade ago and were smitten, returning five times since. They were attracted by B.C.’s natural wonders and a chance for a life amid the stunning scenery of the Fraser Canyon.

“We wanted to have children,” Pannekoek said. “Being in banking and financial management and racing back and forth to daycare – we didn’t feel it would give us the life we wanted.”

The couple moved from the Netherlands to Lillooet this spring after searching across Canada for a suitable location for a vineyard. While the couple both had desk jobs in the Netherlands they were avid wine aficionados and had taken courses on growing and wine production in Europe.

They now have two children and 34,000 vines under their care on a bench above the Fraser River.

Three years for grapes

While it will take at least three years to produce grapes that can be used for wine making, de Bruin and Pannekoek plan to produce revenues long before then. De Bruin is working for the Mount Currie Indian band and the winery is sourcing quality grapes in a style they will eventually make, so they can bottle them under the Fort Berens name.

The couple decided on the name after researching history of the area. Roshard said her husband, Doug, has old survey maps of the valley.

“He thought it (vineyard site) was the location of Fort Berens – and it was,” Christ’l said.

Fort Berens was planned 150 years ago as an outpost for Hudson Bay Co.’s Fort Kamloops. Building was started but never completed.

“That’s one of the things we wanted to do, express the rich history of the area,” Pannekoek said.

While the effort is small, Roshard called it an exciting development amid hard times in the valley. Ainsworth Lumber recently announced it would close its Lillooet mill indefinitely. The valley also suffered in 2002 when the B.C. Liberal government closed a number of government offices.

“We’re absolutely thrilled,” said the former mayor and newspaper editor. “It’s exactly what we’d hoped would happen when we took this project on.”

For now, the couple is focused on establishing the vineyard. Long-term plans include establishing a small hotel and restaurant.

“We want to create a destination vineyard and winery. There’s a lot of people from Vancouver and Kamloops, plus regional traffic. We think Lillooet’s a town with a lot of potential. For tourists, there’s not a lot to go to.”