

Meet Cowichan Valley, B.C., an undiscovered land where food is ultra-local, vineyards are low-key, and canoes replace taxicabs

BY RACHEL LEVIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY

Rowing into town on the Koksilah River



Live the slooow life— if only for a weekend

I KNOW I'VE LANDED in the right place when my B&B host bounds down the steps in his bare feet. “Hey, you made it!” says Dwight Milford, a fit Frisbee fanatic with a big smile. I look around. The place is clean and simple. Not a doily in sight. But even if Affinity Guesthouse were flowery and wicker-y and overrun with chitchatty guests—my personal bed-and-breakfast hell—I wouldn't have cared.

I'm in the town of Cowichan Bay, on southeastern Vancouver Island, surrounded by a grassy meadow scattered with a couple of canoes and rows of quinoa and raspberry bushes. I've left behind my daily grind for a glimpse of a different life—one that doesn't involve traffic or takeout, iPhones or fancy footwear. Just ultra-local food, walks along the river, maybe a

farming class or mushroom forage. This salty seaside village is North America's first official *Cittaslow* (Italian for “Slow City”), as ordained last year by the worldwide association (followed by Sonoma). Slow city. Slow food. Slow is my new speed ... for today.

Sprawling Cowichan Valley isn't as polished as its Northern California slow-city counterpart. Its country roads are lined with small farms, ordinary houses, a few tasting fee-free vineyards. The one swanky resort just went belly up. Hand-scrawled signs offer FREE-RANGE EGGS! FRESH-CUT HERBS! (Payment by honor box, of course.) Some yards are filled with abandoned cars and old boats. Tanning salons sit beside organic bakeries. But back here on Affinity's 22 acres, it's pure bliss. Swallows sing. Bald eagles



Outside True Grain Bread in Cowichan Bay Village

float by. Otters play in the Koksilah River—flowing right by my feet. Which are not bare like Dwight’s, but protected from the muddy bank by a pair of borrowed gum boots. Not those trendy rubbery replicas, but the real deal. And, as I suction-cup-step out of the water and into the canoe, they serve a real purpose.

It’s dinnertime in Cowichan—and if you’re staying with Dwight and his wife, Vanessa Elton, that means you earn it. In this case, with a 1½-mile group paddle to the Genoa Bay Café. It’s sunny but breezy on the wide-open river. We

push past bobbing sea lions and ospreys prancing in their nest. There’s

deep green Salt Spring Island in the distance. An hour later, we pull into a tiny cove with houseboats gleaming in the late-day light—and the cafe, a shack of a special occasion spot, standing on stilts.

Inside it’s a local, candlelit affair. B.C. wines; hali-but hauled off the island’s west coast; risotto with duck from “Lyle’s” farm. Talk turns to the farmer being sued by his new city-slicker neighbor because his roosters make too much noise. (Um, hello, this is farm country!) We polish off a warm apple cobbler, then it’s back to the boat, clopping down the dock in our gum boots. We paddle into a sky streaked yellow and pink. The water is a little choppy but the wind is at our back now. Our pace has picked up—just barely.

We polish off a warm apple cobbler, then it’s back to the boat

Your guide to the slow life in Cowichan

EAT (ABSURDLY) WELL



Hilary’s Artisan Cheese & Deli Apple and aged cheddar soup; cheese boards paired with binoculars and harbor views. 1737 Cowichan Bay Rd., Cowichan Bay; 250/748-5992.

True Grain Bread Is it crazy I took a flight and a ferry for handcrafted challah? Made with organic grains milled on-site. 1725-B Cowichan Bay Rd., Cowichan Bay; 250/746-7664.



Vinoteca Food & Wine Bar Lunch on the porch of a 1903 farmhouse, with an antipasto plate and a flight of rosés. 5039 Marshall Rd., Duncan; 250/709-2279.

Cowichan Bay Farm Everyone gets their chickens, duck eggs, even lambs from the teeny shop at Lyle and Fiona Young’s family farm. cowichanbayfarm.com

Amusé Bistro A simple, ingredient-driven restaurant loved by locals. \$\$\$; 1753 Shawnigan Mill

Bay Rd., Shawnigan Lake; 250/743-3667.
Stone Soup Inn New true farm-to-fork restaurant/B&B from chef Brock Windsor. A bit of a drive, but every single bite makes it worth it. Cooking classes, forages too. \$\$\$; open Thu–Sat; 6755 Cowichan Lake Rd., Cowichan Valley; 250/749-3848.

SIP Of the handful of area vineyards, **Blue Grouse** (4365 Blue Grouse Rd., Duncan; 250/743-3834) and **Averill Creek** (6552 North Rd., Duncan; 250/709-9986) stand out. Try the Pinot Gris on Averill’s patio with valley views. Swing by **Merridale Cidery** (1230 Merridale Rd., Cobble Hill; 250/743-4293) to try eight ciders, made from apples plucked from their orchards.

EXPLORE



Canoe Paddle to dinner (or on multi-day camp trips) with Dwight and Vanessa’s **Gumboot Guiding Canoe Tours**. From \$34 U.S.; reservations required; 866/748-7430.

Hike The woody **Cowichan River Footpath** goes on forever. env.gov.bc.ca
Forage Cookbook

author Bill Jones is the mushroom guy; he hosts Saturday dinners too, at Deerholme Farm. deerholme.com

SLEEP



Affinity Guesthouse Two rooms with river views, in a separate house (pictured) from the hosts. Delicious quinoa crêpes. From \$145 U.S.; affinityguesthouse.ca
Fairburn Farm Old farmhouse with a big porch and valley views. Go now for chef Mara Jernigan’s final culinary boot camp (Sep 28–Oct 3; \$1,930 U.S.) at Fairburn. From \$170 U.S.; fairburnfarm.bc.ca

GETTING THERE



From Seattle, take the Clipper ferry (from \$75 U.S.; clippervacations.com). Or fly to Victoria; it’s an hour drive from the airport on B.C.-1; or take the Brentwood Bay–Mill Bay ferry (\$6 U.S. per passenger, \$14 U.S. per vehicle; bcferries.com). More info: cowichanbay.com