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Gone to the County

Jamie Kennedy's a convert. So is Seaton McLean. Real estate is up 30 per cent. Welcome to Prince Edward County, writes JOHN ALLEMANG, 'Newfoundland with a trust fund'

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Karin Potters has drawn a line in the shimmering sand of Prince Edward County. "No cellphone," says the 32-year-old restaurateur and recent urban refugee, trying to shake the worst bits of Toronto out of her newly simplified soul. "And yesterday I didn't check my voice-mail all day. I'm trying to set some boundaries to capture the lifestyle I came out here to live."

"Out here," from a Toronto-centric perspective, is an unrecognizably peaceful peninsula just two hours east of the city (if you stick to the fast lane), a bucolic almost-island jutting into Lake Ontario that was known as the land that time forgot until droves of utopia-seeking Torontonians found out about its easy pleasures.

The county's unspoiled charm, which combines rolling pasture land and timeless vistas of wave and water with bargain-priced 19th-century houses, has won over the likes of superchef Jamie Kennedy, Maclean's editor Anthony Wilson-Smith, iconoclastic Niagara winemaker Deborah Paskus and media mogul Seaton McLean. "Newfoundland with a trust fund" is how Toronto transplant Geoff Heinrichs describes what he discovered along the peninsula's windswept eastern shoreline, but if Prince Edward County were just nature enriched with cash, its seductive powers wouldn't be nearly so urgent and compelling.

What's fanned the fervour for a place natives simply call The County (to the great delight of the more worldly arrivistes) is its potential as a wine region, the next Burgundy if you believe the more passionate proponents.

"We're blessed here with unbelievable dirt," says James Lahti, a film editor and producer, former Annex resident and co-owner (with his wife, Victoria Rose, and McCarthy Tétrault lawyer Steven Rapkin) of the newly opened Long Dog Winery near Milford, Ont. This is his real-guy County way of saluting what wine buffs refer to as Prince Edward County's *terroir*, the Burgundy-like soil composition that is said to set the region apart from other New World pretenders. And for an estimated investment of a million dollars, not counting the costs of their land or labour, the Long Dog partners are on the verge of transforming that dirt into something more magical.

"For five years, we've been writing cheques to other people," says a newly triumphant Mr. Rapkin, who in his other life handles the intricacies of aircraft financing. "But in the last five weeks, people have been writing cheques to us."

"We've gone from being a bunch of crazy people to a bunch of crazy people whose dreams have come true," announced former NDP MPP, Centennial College president and By Chadsey's Cairns winery owner Richard Johnston during last Saturday's high-spirited opening of the multimillion-dollar Huff Estates Winery -- a lavish event marred only by the fact that no one landed at the winery helipad and the wines served with the local wild-boar terrine were mainly sourced from Niagara grapes (two fierce winters and a shortage of mature vines have delayed the County's progress).

Still where there is, or will be, wine -- eight wineries have already opened and many more are promised -- there is a wine-country lifestyle of stylish restaurants, artisan food producers and deluxe bed and breakfasts that attract big-city sophisticates and the money they're so keen to part with.

Which is where Karin Potters and her chef-husband Michael Potters come in. In May, the veterans of the Toronto dining scene opened the Milford Bistro, giving a tiny hamlet best known for its picturesque mill pond a taste of what urbanites will drive two hours to eat: sautéed quail and foie gras with polenta, mascarpone and pine nuts, roast leg of County lamb with white-bean gratin and celeriac, magret of duck with saffron and honey produced in the nearby picture-perfect village of Bloomfield.

"It was the wineries and the availability of ingredients from family farms that drew us out here," Ms. Potters says. Beyond the easy access to organic lettuce, Prince Edward County also held out the possibility of a safer environment in which to raise their three-year-old daughter, Mia, a bigger house for their inflated Toronto real-estate dollar and an opportunity to trade the city's overheated madness for something more relaxed and fulfilling. The reality, as seems inevitable for those who opt for the simple life, is much more complicated.

"There's the winter," Ms. Potters says with practised terseness, leaving listeners to imagine how they would handle metre-high snowdrifts, -30 temperatures that can wreck the next grape vintage in a night, and an almost complete absence of casual human contact.

Then there's the untouched housing stock from another time and place. "Toronto people see the charm of the old houses, but once you get here, you end up tearing down every wall, and encountering surprises all along the way."

To deal with the mounting costs of their rural adventure, Mr. Potters took a job picking mushrooms, which at least persuaded the doubting locals that he wasn't another soft city boy.

Maybe it's better not to mention the annual drought, for on a lakeside peninsula, who would believe much of the region depends on wells that invariably run dry? In the County, the first duty of a good guest is not to flush.

And finally there's the unexpectedly frantic pace of County life when the rest of the world discovers you're there. "We're out here in the middle of nowhere," Ms. Potters says, "and we've been booked solid since Day One."

Hence the vow to give up cellphones and the promise to hit the beach or go fishing for at least half-an-hour every weekday -- not quite the complete abandon Toronto escapists expect, but at least the sand and the pickerel are right next door.

Trade-offs are inevitable. Psychotherapist Vida Zalnieriunas wasn't quite so eager as her partner Richard Johnston to take on the quest of making Moselle-style riesling at By Chansey's Cairns. But something about the quixotic adventure to grow grapes in a ruthless climate appealed to her "despairing existentialist" side, and now she takes pride in being the winery's best power-washer and the person newcomers turn to when they need to know where to buy vineyard pants with built-in kneepads.

Her friend Caroline Granger, who once fled provincial Toronto for a career in Paris as a model and actress, has returned to run The Grange winery with her lawyer father. She's still surprised to find herself making small talk about the best ways to control vineyard mildew -- she sums up her transformation as "from Dior gowns to white plastic spraysuits." At the same time, she's managed to draw on her past life to help bring in Theatre Passe-Muraille for a season at Picton's Regent

theatre.

Peter Mennacher, a German lawyer turned chardonnay grower, sculptor and Lake Ontario windsurfer, doesn't think much of the local schools ("He's comparing them to Germany," says his wife, Alice) but loves the County's hunting, fishing and familial bonds -- three generations will live side by side, and it's not uncommon to round a corner and see the same name adorning a road sign, two mailboxes and three headstones in a pioneer cemetery.

That ancestral tightness has its drawbacks for the newcomers and their children, notes Gudrun Gallo, a former Toronto art director and mother of three boys who runs Black River Vineyards with her husband Elia Gallo, a transitioning accountant. "When you've got these 200-year-old United Empire Loyalist connections," she says, "it can get a bit cliquish. And farm kids don't play after school -- they've got chores." But inevitably, with some give and take on both sides, it starts to work. Mr. Gallo now proudly shows off the tractor accessories a neighbour jerry-rigged for him last winter. "I'm the guy who goes back to Toronto," he jokes, "and boasts of getting a manure-spreader for Christmas."

Ms. Potter still can't believe a local acquaintance volunteered to help make hors d'oeuvres for a winery opening and kept working till 4 a.m. And Jamie Kennedy's annual fish fry for the residents of Hillier, where he's slowly setting up a vineyard and restaurant complex, is already a local legend.

Still, all the breaking down of social barriers, Prince Edward County buzz and the real-estate boom that goes with it -- sales volume is up 30 per cent over last year -- will count for little if the wines don't turn out as promised.

"It's on the cusp of living up to its potential," says a guarded Mr. Heinrichs, one of the region's earliest promoters, who thinks the moneyed crowd may find it easier to build wine palaces than do the dirty work of growing good grapes. "My worry is that people will wade through some of the plonk that's being made and then write off the whole area."

Not if Mr. Lahti can help it. He has moved his entire digital editing facilities to his remote home office, feeds and cares for the film directors who now troop down to the County for post-production, and takes immense pleasure in the grapes he's coaxing out of the ground.

"There's no better place to make chardonnay and pinot noir," says the former Toronto road rager who has found peace on a slow-moving tractor. "I have this dirt in my blood."



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