

River of Mist

A landscape revealed.

As I wheeled my wheezing clunker through the gritty streets of downtown Eugene, signs of early autumn arose and passed — gold-tinged leaves, a dark V of south-winged geese, schoolkids staggering under lumpy backpacks — but I've still got the Skeena River in my eyes.

About 500 miles north of Vancouver, B.C., the Skeena flows out of the jagged, broken layers of shale and ore-rich metamorphic rock of the Skeena and Hazelton Mountains, cuts through glacier-carved valleys and the Kitimak Range near the coast, finally reaching the Hecate Strait and the Pacific just below Prince Rupert. The First Nations peoples of the upper river have lived, hunted and fished along its shores for hundreds of generations. The people are the Gitksan, and they call the Skeena the River of Mist.

In high summer, when the Skeena entered my eyes, there were no obscuring mists. The river lay open, shores draped in bright green stands of aspen, alder, cottonwood, dotted

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with dense stands of fir, cedar, spruce. The river air tasted tangy and sweet, with a hint of cedary spice. The water drew lazy curves through thick shoals of salmon gravels. Most striking, though, was the river's color, a pale green like old Chinese jade or milky absinthe, creamy yet icy-clear.

The Skeena and its tributaries, the Bulkley and Kispiox, teemed with fall-run steelhead and salmon, especially the big, gray-sided fish called pinks or "humpies" for their distinctive humped backs. Below the raft piloted by our Gitksan guide, Sheldon Johnson of the Frog clan, the humpies rushed and darted, furtive and shadowy as torpedoes; their dorsal fins sliced through the shallows in spawning frenzies. There, the Skeena's color was frappé of creme de menthe, impossible color, or at least unutterably improbable.

Improbable, too, that the river is still so clean, so vital yet serene. It pained my heart to remember when the McKenzie's gravels swarmed with silvers and chinooks, not so many years ago, before it became a murky-gray ditch to carry pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers and human wastes to dump into the Columbia. Is this what it means to "civilize" a great river? Is this the fate foretold for the Skeena?

No grapes grow in the valleys of the Skeena, and there no wines are made, but there we were able to buy a side of wild sockeye salmon and grill its deep-red flesh and dress it in a sauce of Kat's invention involving fresh cilantro, shredded nasturtium flowers, and serrano chilis, and drink with it a bottle of **Elk Cove Vineyards 2002 Pinot Gris** (\$13.50). Wine guru Robert Parker called this "one of the best pinot gris I've tasted," high praise from him for any Oregon wine, but in this case on the mark:

perfect balance, bright flavors of ripe pears and white flowers, generous and rich, this is an achievement, a benchmark for this producer, and a perfect match for salmon.

British Columbia's liquor-control laws are weirder and more Puritanical than Oregon's, so we couldn't possibly have found there this lovely bottle of **Michel Collon Brut Champagne** (\$20), but I hope you can find it here (if not, order it at your favorite wine shop). Some folks like their Champagnes light and airy; this ain't. This is full-flavored, 80 percent pinot noir, lush and juicy, suitable for a wide range of foods. Delicious and satisfying Champagne at this price? Gotta have it.

Our Canadian cousins are determined to make fine wines — as Bob Sogge has pointed out, they are now the world's largest producer of ice wines, wonderfully sweet dessert wines made from various grapes — especially from the Okanogan Valley and especially pinot noir.

Gotta wish them



the best of luck with that tricky grape, but we gotta hope they look for their standards not so much at Old World Burgundy or New World Californians, but down here in Cool Country, in the Valley of the Willamette. Hope they can achieve something like **Andrew Rich Les Vigneaux 2001 Pinot Noir Cuvée B** (\$18); this is Rich's "B" wine, not the "A" level, but affordable quality, yet it deserves better than a B, maybe B+ or A-, for its smoky black cherry flavors, its food-friendly balance of acids and tannins and alcohol (13.5 percent). If B.C. winemakers can reach this grade, they can compete with anyone. Then, if they can produce a wine like **Broadley 2002 Pinot Noir Reserve** (\$14.50!), they can rejoice: deep, rich, round and mouth-filling, with a velvet texture and priced to tickle the purse of any pinot-phile, this wine will only improve over the next three to five years. How good will it be then? Find the wine, hide it from yourself, later find the answer.

Not our Canadian brethren nor our Willamette Valley neighbors (but watch the vintners in the Valleys of the Columbia and the Rogue) are likely soon to produce a wine like California's **Liberty School 2000 Syrah** (\$13), inky-dark, full-bodied, rich and concentrated in black fruit flavors (blackberries, currants), this is a Rhone-style blockbuster at sale prices, worth every dime. Get in your last evenings of outdoor grilling of full-flavored grub, pop the top on this black beauty, savor unfolding autumn.

Maybe take a moment to reflect on times past, wonder at the passing of clean, jade-green rivers and the huddled, ghostly shadows of wild salmon. May the Skeena River, the River of Mist, be then in your eyes, and in your heart.

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