

SUMMER
WELL
SPENT



slow rotation

A British Columbian village of ski-town migrants finds its agricultural roots.

BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DAVE STEERS

We're on an early break ahead of a strange peloton as we roll slowly up the Pemberton Meadows through some of British Columbia's most fertile farmland. Ours is a mixed group of two couples pedaling a cruiser, hardtail, cyclocross bike, and tricked-out carbon roadster. We bypass the farm tours and culinary stands—for now—to stay ahead of the pack. Thirty minutes to the south in Whistler, the freeride mountain bike festival known as Crankworx is drawing a different crowd. But here in Pemberton, Canada's fastest growing mountain town famous for its backcountry ski terrain, the goal is to drift through verdant agricultural land and sample the locally grown beet salad.

The ride meanders up a long, flat floodplain that cuts through commercial seed potato fields and organic veggie farms. Three thousand cyclists are here for the food and the view. It's called Slow Food Cycle Sunday. The ride was envisioned to showcase the distinct Pemberton hybrid of agricultural heritage, the local organic movement, and its recent influx of active West-Coast types.

Pemberton has seen a wave of Whistler expat snowmobile-skiers, downhill mountain bikers, and semi-pro charger types migrate north during the last decade for affordable housing and small-town atmosphere. The immigration resulted in a massive demographic shift in Pemberton's population—more kids, dogs, and expensive toys. (Pemberton now boasts the unofficial title of most bikes per capita in the province.) But unlike other mountain boomtowns in Canada and the Mountain West, the shift didn't come with the bar brawls and NIMBY-ism symptomatic of such socio-economic rifts. And the Slow Food Cycle is one of the reasons why.

Or at least it's emblematic of Pemberton's mix of ideas, landscape, and people. Pemberton's mayor, for instance, is longtime Blackcomb ski patroller and organic farmer Jordan Sturdy. Sturdy moved to Pemberton in 1989, purchasing 40 acres with a barn and a tractor for the same price of a gothic arc ski house in Whistler. "Back in those days there weren't many people commuting to Whistler. I used to drive to work on a road that didn't have very many tracks on it and sometimes not even a plow," Sturdy says.

Sturdy, who owns and operates North Arm Farm, an organic veggie and berry operation with a popular you pick component, notes that, initially, most of the first-wave





Ice Cap Organics.
Photograph by
Delaney Zayac

migrants still worked, shopped, and played in Whistler. Today, Pemberton offers an overflowing community garden, a volunteer-built network of singletrack trails, and a new skate park. The ensuing baby boom resulted in the addition of a third kindergarten class at the village elementary school.

The community (about 3,000 residents) is still closely tied to Whistler—70 percent of household income comes from the Whistler tourism economy—but Pemberton has resisted the typical transformation into ski-town suburbia. There are no cul-de-sacs paving over its rurality. Again, the reason has to do with Pemberton's farming heritage. Rich soil, unlimited glacier-fed irrigation, and hot summers make for profitable farming both for commercial export and farmer's markets. Also credit Canada's Agricultural Land Reserve Act, which prevents unchecked subdivision of farmland.

Add to that an unintended marketing campaign courtesy of film crews like Teton Gravity Research and Matchstick Productions, which started making regular stops for snowmobile-assisted skiing. The footage of untapped access and big terrain attracted seasoned athletes looking for a place to settle down and start families. Many of them—like snowboard photographer Chris Ankeny who first came to Pemberton from Bozeman, Montana—were introduced to the town after coming for the cheap heli-ski drops on Mount Currie. "There's nowhere else you can get runs like that right from the valley," says Ankeny. "I came to the realization that if there was a dream spot to live, this was it."

Ankeny and his fiancé, graphic designer Lisa Komuro, moved to Pemberton in 2005 and started the Mount Currie Coffee Company in 2007, bringing artisan-roasted coffee, organic menu options, and a creative coffeehouse culture to town. Since then they've earned permanent Canadian residency, added a son to their family, and

turned their shop into a Pemberton morning fixture. They also buy local produce from Helmer's Organic Farm.

The emerging food culture has resulted in new restaurants, a local bakery, a vodka distillery, and a new crop of organic farmers up and down the Meadows. Delaney Zayac is one of those new farmers. Zayac owns Ice Cap Organics (a farm stop on the Slow Food tour). He's also a former ski photographer. "Pemberton is open and welcoming to people who are interested in farming," says Zayac. "The farmers here want to see young people getting interested because farming was fading out for a long time."

Back on our bikes weaving through the happy masses, we stop to pull some river-cooled Kokanees from the Lillooet River to wash down a pile of grass-finished beef burgers. (Naturally, the profits of the burger stand benefit the local search and rescue.) We take in the panoramic views and watch the eclectic stream roll by. The roadway is packed with chariot-toting families, greybeards on antique bikes, hippie girls with basketfuls of produce, and slow-moving snowboarders pedaling eight-inch DH bikes through the 90-degree heat.

Suddenly, Slow Food Cycle feels less like a movement for local, organic farming, and more like a community celebrating a rediscovered agricultural identity. But from my perspective, surrounded by the towering ice-capped peaks, and well fed on local fare, Pemberton just seems like the perfect place for a skier to put down roots.

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The Slow Food Cycle Sunday ride is a postcard-perfect, mostly flat, 50-kilometer out-and-back. It's not a race. Stop at as many of the 30 farmstands and 12 family farms that line the route. They serve up everything from fresh local produce and grass-fed beef to Pemberton potato vodka. Check it out at: slowfoodcyclesunday.com