



Like these examples at Stanley Park last year, studio Hfour will offer a West Coast take on the Japanese tradition of welcoming the spring amid the flowering of cherry trees. Lukasz Szczepanski photos.

Cherry Blossom Festival illuminates

Light, music, dancers, and more will elevate this year's blossoms beyond mere viewing into immersive art



Preparing for the pink bloom

"One thing that sets us apart from other festivals

> BY ALEXANDER VARTY

Cherry-blossom viewing must be some kind of Zen, contemplative thing, right? Well, yes and no.

"The traditional idea of it being a meditative and thoughtful experience is kind of like cultural propaganda, for lack of a proper term," says Stuart Ward of Hfour, the "experiential studio" responsible for lighting up Vancouver's annual Cherry Blossom Festival. "You go to Japan during cherry-blossom season, and go to Ueno Park, the biggest park in Tokyo, and there will be a million people in that park, literally, and everybody is picnicking and getting drunk."

"The tranquillity and peacefulness," he adds, "comes when you've had too much to drink and all you can do is lie down and stare up at the trees."

You can't buy a beer from a vending machine in Vancouver, at least not yet, and brown-baggers in our public parks are subject to seizure and a scolding, or worse, from the local constabulary. And while an unusually harsh West Coast winter has many pinning for a piña colada under the spring sun, Ward is not advocating going over the legal limit while scoping out the pink blooms of *Prunus serrulata*. But he and Hfour plan to make the annual cherry bloom somewhat more exciting than simply watching the petals bud, blossom, and fall.

"The core idea of tranquillity and cherry-blossom viewing at night, *yozakura*, is about taking a moment to reflect on the shortness of life, the ephemerality of all things," says Ward. "We've taken that, and created an experience around illuminating the cherry blossoms. In Japan, they set up spotlights in the trees; they're basically high-powered bulbs that illuminate the blossoms

in white light, or yellowish-white light, so that people can see them. But, doing projection and light art, I was inspired by the blossoms as a potential canvas for projections and illumination, and decided 'Oh, we should see if we could take the core idea of cherry-blossom viewing at night and transform it into a more artful experience—a more experiential thing than just having some food and drinks under the illuminated trees.' So we'll have colourful light, projected light, a team of dancers led by a choreographer [Heather Laura Gray], and a soundtrack related to spring that we'll be playing in an ambient way. It's a celebration of the arrival of spring from a West Coast, multicultural perspective."

Having previously lived in Japan for "half a decade", Ward is happy to tell us about the origins of cherry-blossom viewing. It began, he explains, as a rural and somewhat bacchanalian custom honouring the disappearance of snow on the mountain passes. Think *The Rite of Spring*, but with kimonos. "No people could come or go from their village for the duration of winter," he says, "so the melting of the snow and the arrival of the cherry blossoms was a big celebration. 'Oh, we can go and visit the neighbouring village again. We can go and engage in commerce and trade again.'"

What Ward can't tell you is just when or even where his Spring Lights Illumination event will take place.

Forecasting the annual bloom has always been an inexact science, and this year's wacky weather patterns haven't helped. Fortunately, Hfour and the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival have a secret weapon.

"We were initially planning on doing March 31 and April 1, at Queen Elizabeth Park—but, as you can tell by the weather, that's definitely not happening," he reveals. "But there's this guy, Joseph [Lin]. He's an elderly gentleman, and from about February on he's got a series of plum trees and early-blooming cherry trees, and for the past couple of decades he's been monitoring them. Like clockwork, when they start to bloom he can map out the bloom of every other grove in the city."

"We got information from Joseph that the Easter long weekend was probably going to be okay," he adds. "And then we got more information that that is still too early, and we should be targeting the 21st and 22nd of April, so it keeps getting pushed back a little bit."

Keep an eye on the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival website for a definitive announcement, he suggests. And watch the festival in future years for even more reasons to get outside, at night, under colourful trees.

"I'm hoping that this becomes a cultural thing in the city," Ward says. "Oh, it's spring and the cherry blossoms are out. Let's go to the illuminations! Wonder where that's happening this year? And ideally, it'll be on for the entire duration of the bloom." ♦

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival takes place at various locations from Thursday (March 30) to April 23. For a full schedule and breaking blossom news, visit www.vcbf.ca/.

is that we actively engage people." Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival founder Linda Poole says by phone. "Initially, we were known as the quietest and most contemplative festival... but to keep everyone's interest, I keep having to create new things. So we've gradually become a little bit noisier but I still think it all goes back to the cherry blossoms."

Inclement weather means that the 2017 edition of the VCBF, which runs until April 23, might be well under way before the first cherry flowers show their pretty pink heads. Here, though, are three ways to whet your anticipation for the big bloom to come.

- The free **Cherry Jam Downtown Concert**, at the Burrard SkyTrain concourse Thursday (March 30), offers groups such as **Uzume Taiko** and **Son de Maple** in concert, under indoor trees that might be immune to the wet weather outside. **Why Son de Maple**, which plays the music of western Mexico? The VCBF is not a celebration of Japanese culture, says Poole, but "a celebration of beauty."

- Submit your own 17-syllable poem to the Haiku Invitational, a VCBF-sponsored online-publishing initiative. (Enter here: www.vcbf.ca/) This year's theme is freedom, and you might be surprised how much the three-line format allows.

- According to Poole, Vancouver is home to "43,000 cherry trees and 54 different cultivars", with the most popular being the Kwanzan cherry, a variety first bred in China. Learn more cherry facts via the VCBF's Tree Talks & Walks, scheduled to take place at various Vancouver parks once the bloom begins. Again, see www.vcbf.ca/ for dates and times.

> ALEXANDER VARTY

A MAP FOR FLORAL SNAPS

♦ Vancouver's cherry-blossom season is imminent, and with it comes an opportunity to capture some seriously gorgeous shots of our city in full bloom.

To help residents make the most of the occasion, which will kick off alongside the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival on March 30, the Vancouver park board has put together a handy map presenting the best spots in the city to find the pretty pink-and-white petals.

The map includes the addresses of over 2,100 cherry trees in Metro Vancouver as well as in municipalities such as Agassiz and Chilliwack. "Festival favourite" locations (a.k.a. the most photogenic sites) are marked by red pins, while others are marked by blue ones.

Users may search cherry-tree scenes by their preferred neighbourhood, cultivar, or a combination of both. Each spot is accompanied by a time frame in which the trees there are expected to flower, though these dates were drawn from the 2016 season. Given Vancouver's unusually long winter, this year's cherry blossoms may begin flowering at later dates.

The full map may be viewed at maps.vcbf.ca/map/. "Cherry scouts" will also be updating the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival's Blooming Now page with images of budding sites.

Taking place from March 30 to April 23, this year's Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival features a number of concerts, workshops, and art exhibitions happening around town.

> LUCY LAU

PAUL TOFFOLI MBA
 RESIDENTIAL + INVESTMENT REAL ESTATE
CALL ME FOR EXPERT ADVICE
WWW.TOFFOLI.CA | PAUL@TOFFOLI.CA
 604.787.6963

Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation
 Would you like to swallow 20 pills every day, just to digest your food? If you had cystic fibrosis, you'd have no choice.
1-800-378-CCFF Please help us.
www.cysticfibrosis.ca

DREAM DESIGNS
 Stylish natural living since 1981
Organic Natural Healthy Bedding, Bath, Yoga & More
 Quality made in Vancouver for over 35 years
Donate your gently used & clean jammies, bedding, and towels and receive 15% off organic cotton bedding and bath
 Offer ends on Apr 15/17
 2749 Main Street (12th & Main) Tel 604.254.5012 dreamdesigns.ca

GENETIC SURPRISE
PLAY LOOKS TO THE FUTURE 26

FENTANYL BLOWBACK
EMAILS REVEAL TAXPAYER RAGE 7

MOVIE FESTS
R2R, JUST FILM, AND VSAFF 31-34

CHERRY BLOSSOMS
CITY CELEBRATES IN STYLE 14

THE GEORGIA
straight
VANCOUVER'S NEWS & WEEKLY STRAIGHT.COM



capture
festival

Photoconceptual artists such as Kelly Jazvac and Kelly Lycan are redefining lens-based imagery; plus, Canada's hidden history is unveiled