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Oregon's Willamette Valley: Wine Country Travel Without the Headaches

Looking for a wine-country trip without the overpriced tasting rooms and crowded restaurants? Go west, young tourist. The Willamette Valley, near Portland, is home to more than just America's best Pinot Noir—from truly great eats to accommodations in a converted silo.



By LETTIE TEAGUE

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WINE-COUNTRY travel can often be better in theory than practice, with overpriced tasting rooms, heavily trafficked highways and crowded restaurants and bars. Does an oenophile's paradise even exist anymore? While some may pine for the palazzos of Tuscany, for me it's the Willamette Valley of Oregon. About an hour south of Portland, the Willamette Valley is synonymous with great Pinot Noir. But it has much more to offer: namely, a laid-back atmosphere in which visitors can still meet winemakers in person, eat meals next to famous winemaking families, ride horseback through vineyards and spend the night in a vintage trailer park.

In almost everything—from wineries to hotels to dining locales—travelers will find a disarming lack of pretension. Take, for example, my first meal. Hidden among the many shopping plazas in Newberg, a key wine town and one of the northernmost in the valley, the Dos Mundos Food Cart came highly recommended. “Prepared to be thrilled,” Rollin Soles, winemaker and owner of Roco Winery in Newberg, told me. When I arrived in the pawnshop parking lot, chef-owner Jesus Hernandez was in the middle of making lunch—a spice-laden menu of tacos, burritos and larger plates. I chose the fish tacos, which were perfectly cooked and replete with vegetables. Mr. Hernandez worked in the kitchens of famous Napa Valley restaurants such as Redd and Martini House before moving to Oregon four years ago, and said he preferred the Willamette Valley because its towns were “calm and small.” He found plenty of appreciative customers; open Monday to Saturday, Dos Mundos often closes early because everything has sold out.

The Dos Mundos truck is located on Highway 99, as are many Willamette Valley restaurants and wineries. The road isn't particularly charming (too many gas stations and big-box stores), but it cuts through other such important wine towns as Dundee and McMinnville. The charm and the beauty—not to mention many of the best wineries—are found in the hills above. The 150-mile-long Willamette Valley is home to over 500 wineries. An official wine region since 1983, the area has been divided over the past 12 years into several subregions that have added to its renown, including Eola-Amity Hills, Yamhill-Carlton, McMinnville and Dundee Hills, the four places where I spent most of my time.

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The next day, I headed to downtown Newberg (population: 22,765), where one of my favorite discoveries was Social Goods Market. This cute “family market” carries a particularly good selection of local wines, including a vast array of rosés. Before the toy, food and wine shop opened this spring, the owners solicited residents’ opinions on what they should stock. “So Oregon!” my friend Deb, a native, observed.

The greatest Newberg attractions, however, lie outside of downtown. That’s where you’ll find the Allison Inn & Spa, the valley’s only glamorous, Napa-style resort. It boasts both a fancy, garden-to-table restaurant (Jory) and a modern spa. A number of notable wineries also have Newberg addresses, including Brick House Vineyard, Bergström Wines and Roco Winery, all located in the hills. Larger Newberg wineries, like Rex Hill and August Cellars, are found along the highway.

August Cellars is actually a consortium of small producers. One of them, Tyson Crowley, was recommended to me by David Millman, of Domaine Drouhin Oregon in Dayton, so I stopped by for a chat and a taste of some very good Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. (Mr. Millman’s recommendation is the sort of collegiality regularly practiced here— something I haven’t always encountered in more fashionable wine locales). Mr. Crowley, who only makes a small amount of wine each year, conducts tastings in his barrel room as the August Cellars tasting room only offers a few of his wines. This DIY philosophy is part of the fabric of the Willamette Valley wine community, going back to its beginnings in the mid-1960s and early ’70s, when a group of vintners decided to try

growing Pinot Noir in the inhospitable, rainy climate. Like those who make it to the region at the end of the computer game “The Oregon Trail,” they were a hardy bunch: Dick Erath of Erath Winery, Bill Blosser of Sokol Blosser Winery, David Adelsheim of Adelsheim Vineyard, Dick Ponzi of Ponzi Vineyards and the late David Lett of the Eyrie Vineyards. The second wave of winemakers, putting down stakes 20 years later, expanded the region’s portfolio beyond Pinot Noir. Don Lange, of Lange Estate Winery and Vineyards, was one of the first to put Pinot Gris on the map in Oregon. I ran into Mr. Lange and his family while dining at Tina’s, a popular dinner spot in Dundee, on my second night. The restaurant is relaxed and convivial, and its well-chosen, well-priced wine list is a draw for both local vintners and tourists. Open for dinner only, the restaurant serves classic dishes such as seared duck breast and poached salmon Troisgros. Thanks to its combination of great food, great wine and the company of great winemakers, Tina’s delivered what was easily the best meal of my trip.



Willamette Valley and its surrounding area

Dundee is also home to some of the other most popular restaurants in the Willamette Valley (the Dundee Bistro, Red Hills Provincial Dining) and some of its top wineries (Argyle, Erath, Lange Estate). One of the most recent additions, Purple Hands Winery, opened its new tasting room the week of my visit. I was tipped off to the news by Karen Utz, owner of Black Walnut Inn & Vineyard, a stylish, Tuscany-meets- Oregon bed-and-breakfast where I spent two nights. The workers were putting the finishing touches on the space, and Purple Hands winemaker and owner Cody Wright was pouring his own Pinots when I stopped by for a tasting. Mr. Wright is descended from Oregon winemaking royalty; Ken Wright, whom Wine Spectator called “a master of Pinot Noir,” is his father, and Roco Winery’s Mr. Soles is his stepfather. But he’s humble about his connections: “Just because I am who I am doesn’t mean my wines are any good.” In fact, they’re very good, especially the 2014 Holstein Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$50).

At Red Ridge Farms in nearby Dayton, co-owner Paul Durant was busy serving guests snacks and glasses of Durant Vineyards wine at the cafe when I popped in to ask for a tour of his Oregon Olive Mill—the first in the state. Still, he gladly complied, taking me through the mill and a tasting of the four extra virgin olive oils it produces (\$25 for one hour). During harvest, Mr. Durant works the press. He said he is more relaxed about people watching him these days. With typical Oregonian modesty, he said that after eight years, he finally felt like he knew what he was doing. Just down the road in Carlton, Equestrian Wine Tours leads vineyard tours from the Wine Country Farm, where later that afternoon I took a ride on Teddy, a well-mannered Tennessee walking horse. Tour company co-owner Jake Price and guide Sarah Ann Hahn, a cowgirl with a self-published gluten-free cookbook, took us to four wineries. The best was Winter’s Hill Vineyard, where our tasting was conducted by winemaker and owner Russell Gladhart.



Purple Hands owner Cody punching down fermenting grapes
PHOTO: DAVE LAURIDSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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It turned out that Teddy was stabled not far from my next destination, Abbey Road Farm Bed & Breakfast in Carlton, so I paid him another visit later that day before checking in. The hotel, made of three converted grain silos, was the idea of owner John Stuart, who came here 13 years ago with his wife, Judi, to raise goats and open an inn. While the hotel is thriving, the herd is down to four. The goats, unlike the guests, were too much work, said Ms. Stuart.

The silo, an unusual accommodation, wasn't even the quirkiest of my trip. That distinction belonged to the Vintages Trailer Resort in Dayton. The tattooed woman who handed me the key to my tiny, streamlined 1965 Avion trailer assured me that all long-term residents had passed "extensive criminal background checks." Though the trailers feature stylish interiors, L'Occitane bath products and Portland-worthy pour-over coffee, come prepared for a camping experience: Smaller trailers don't have showers. For the unlucky few, there's a central restroom and shower facility. I made sure my Avion came with a full bathroom. No midnight showering for me.

From the resort, it's an easy drive to several prominent wineries: Stoller Family Estate, in Dayton, produces notable Chardonnays and very good rosé. Ken Wright Cellars is a dominant presence in downtown Carlton, while outside of Carlton, Soter Vineyards is home to some terrific Pinot Noirs and a first-class sparkling rosé.

I spent my final day in McMinnville, a favorite with locals thanks to a charming downtown that's within walking distance of a number of wineries and has good dining options. Foodies looking to meet winemakers, or just get a really good grilled cheese, should head to Community Plate. Nick's Italian Cafe was once "the center of the Oregon wine industry," said Mr. Soles. I don't know if that's still true; after a rather mediocre dinner there, I'd give Tina's the edge. Tina's is everything I love about the Willamette Valley: unpretentious, delicious and fun.

THE LOWDOWN // Savoring the Willamette Valley

Staying There:

At the luxurious Black Walnut Inn & Vineyard in Dundee, rooms come with panoramic views, nightly wine tastings and large breakfasts. Get closer to nature at Le Puy A Wine Valley Inn, minutes from downtown Newberg, where the eight serene rooms have names like Air and Earth. In Carlton, stay in converted grain silos on a working farm at Abbey Road Farm Bed & Breakfast.

Eating There:

Tina's classic dishes—think beef tenderloin and seared duck breast—and extensive, well-priced wine list make it beloved by residents and tourists alike. Stop by the Wine & Bubble Bar at the Ponzi family's Dundee Bistro before heading to the terrace for casual bistro fare. At McMinnville's Community Plate, the wine selection is limited but local, the menu unpretentious and the grilled cheese (white cheddar, Swiss and chèvre, with sautéed apples and thyme, on thick, crusty bread) divine.

Exploring There:

Equestrian Wine Tours in Carlton offers riders of various skill levels tours of nearby vineyards, with several wine tasting stops. The first olive mill in Oregon is located in Dayton, adjacent to Durant Vineyards and a plant nursery— all owned by the Durant family.

Now a popular antiques mall, the circa 1912 schoolhouse in tiny Lafayette carries notable collections of china, books and Pacific Northwest ephemera.



Pinot grapes ready for harvest at Soter Vineyards

PHOTO: DAVE LAURIDSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

TRAIL BLAZERS // Five Must- Visit Willamette Valley Wineries

The Eyrie Vineyards

Founded in 1966 by “Papa Pinot” David Lett and his wife, Diana, this former poultry-processing plant turned working winery near downtown McMinnville offers current vintages as well as library releases of older bottlings of the winery’s Pinot Noirs.

Ponzi Vineyards

Dick Ponzi was one of the early Oregon Pinot pioneers, founding his winery in Sherwood in 1970. Today, daughters Luisa (winemaker) and Maria (sales and marketing) run the family business. Their new winery, one of the closest to Portland, is an architecturally impressive edifice in the Chehalem Mountains. Make sure to order the Pinot Blanc, a specialty.

Domaine Drouhin Oregon

Burgundian vintner Robert Drouhin saw the promise of Oregon Pinot Noir some 40 years ago and established his winery in the Red Hills of Dundee in 1988. The “French soul, Oregon soil” estate in Dayton offers tastings of wines from Oregon and France.

Lange Estate Winery and Vineyards

Poet-musician-turned-vintner Don Lange and his wife, Wendy (who also runs a shop and eatery in downtown Dundee), founded their winery in 1987. The Langes, along with Don’s son, Jesse, operate one of the most welcoming tasting rooms in Dundee, featuring a quartet of friendly Shetland Sheepdogs and views of the valley worthy of its “buena vista” address.

Soter Vineyards

Although Tony Soter made his name as a Cabernet winemaker in Napa Valley, he returned home to Oregon full-time in 2001 to produce Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and a top-flight sparkling rosé from his Mineral Springs Ranch, set high above the town of Carlton. The tasting room, with a panoramic view of the Yamhill-Carlton hills, is open by appointment only.



Lange Family Estates owner Don Lange with his four Shelties *PHOTO: DAVE THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*