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Wines of Oregon's Willamette Valley

Summer Sipping in Oregon's Willamette Valley



Oregonians sip and swirl all year long, but once summer arrives in the Willamette Valley, oenophiles and weekend wine warriors make for the vineyards and country hamlets southwest of Portland. With more than 200 wineries spread throughout the Willamette Valley, a wine tasting experience is as close as 30 minutes from downtown Portland. And wineries are as different as the wine they produce ranging from tasting rooms in converted barns and turkey farms to large operations adorned with all the viticultural "bells and whistles."

"Wine tourism is booming in the Valley" said Sue Horstmann, director of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association, which oversees more than 150 member wineries and tasting rooms in the valley. For the past nine years Horstmann has led the marketing efforts of the valley's member wineries extolling the virtues of having a "huge wine industry in our own backyard."

"The Willamette Valley and Pinot Noir used to be a well-kept secret," says Horstmann "but now the rest of the world is finding us." Horstmann attributes some of the recent interest in Pinot Noir and wine to the movie Sideways which champions the delicate complexities of the Pinot Noir grape. She also praises what's happening in the vineyards and wineries. "Willamette Valley is producing world class Pinot Noir on a consistent basis," said Horstmann. "With limited availability many wines never leave Oregon."

And luckily, Oregonians, as well as visitors, have easy access to wine tasting, especially on the two popular wine weekends, **Memorial Day Weekend in Wine Country, May 26-28, 2007** and **Wine Country Thanksgiving, November 23-25, 2007**. Many of the small, boutique wineries open for tastings during these two weekends, although they are also open by appointment throughout the year. Both the large and small wineries offer a wide range of wine tasting activities, from sampling library wines, and tasting new releases to entertainment and catered barbecues. Sponsored by the Willamette Valley Winery Association, the wine touring weekends began in 1982 with the popular Thanksgiving weekend. Memorial Day weekend was added in 1990 to encourage visitors to explore the valley and try new wineries.




Pearl District residents Rick and Sue Caskey recently moved to Portland from Northern California and said they love the friendly, personal approach to wine tasting they find in the Willamette Valley. "The valley today is like Napa and Sonoma valleys 25 years ago," said Rick Caskey. "There are so many different styles of Pinot Noir that it's fun searching for the one you love."

The Willamette Valley wine region is only in its fourth decade; the first 3,000 vines of Pinot Noir were planted by David and Diana Lett of Eyrie Vineyards in 1966. As one of the early Oregon wine pioneers, the Letts join Dick and Nancy Ponzi, Dick Erath, and David Adelsheim, names synonymous with innovation and a steadfast belief in the elusive Pinot Noir grape. These families - -and all the others who came after - -are bound to their land and the soil and see themselves as stewards of the earth.

"Pinot Noir is a passionate wine - a wine of pure pleasure and hedonism, engaging all the senses," British wine authority Jancis Robinson told her audience in a keynote speech at the International Pinot Noir Celebration. "It is a wine we can wallow in."

Today, the valley is still off the beaten track; a patchwork of country roads winding past pastoral farms, Victorian inns, an occasional llama farm, and of course 10,000 acres of vineyards dotting the hillsides from Portland 100 miles southwest to Eugene. This long,

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broad slice of wine country sits between the Cascade Mountains and the Coastal Range, providing a perfect balance of warm, sun-drenched summers and mild, wet winters.

"There is such a mystique around Pinot Noir" said Horstmann "because it is such a difficult grape to grow more handling is needed in the vineyard." This translates to higher labor costs and often higher prices for consumers. "But today, winemakers are producing Pinot Noir at every price point so beginners can sharpen their palates with a less expensive bottle before they move onto the higher end products."



The valley also prides itself on experimentation - from different blending techniques to different grape varieties. Aside from the well-known Pinot Noir grape, the valley is experiencing a revolution of grape varieties and wines. The cool-climate of the Willamette Valley is also ideal for other members of the Pinot family, including Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, as well as Chardonnay and Riesling.

Highway 99 West or the "wine road" as locals refer to it converges on Newberg, where literally all roads lead to wine. Roads splinter off into the distant hills where wineries are abundant or continue south to the country towns of Dundee and Lafayette, known for its burgeoning antique district. A slight diversion into the Red Hills above Dundee will lead you to the old ghost towns of Carlton and Yamhill where the turn-of-the-century towns are sprucing up with new restaurants and state-of-the-art wineries. But it is still a magical place where the winemaker pours your taste, drives the tractor and prunes the vines.

Ask any winemaker in the Willamette Valley and they will regale you with the significance of place, or terroir, the soil where the grape originated. The federal government established a system for labeling wine with a specific name to help consumers understand the source of the grape. Known informally as AVA's (American Viticultural Areas) the Willamette Valley received the first Oregon distinction in 1983. Winemakers continued to petition for even more specific AVA's and since 2005, six new AVA's were adopted including Yamhill-Carlton District, Dundee Hills, McMinnville, Ribbon Ridge and most recently Chehalem Mountains and Eola-Amity Hills.



"Finally, wine consumers will know the exact geographic site where the grape was grown," said Horstmann. "Pinot Noir, especially, is so site specific with a different flavor depending on soil type and location."

The Willamette Valley's wineries are a hotbed of innovation and sustainable agriculture has captured a wide audience ranging from organic to biodynamic winemakers. Biodynamic farming is actually a return to simpler times where farmers eschew chemicals in favor of compost and beneficial insects to maintain strong vines. Ted Casteel of Bethel Heights Vineyard co-founded the LIVE (Low Input Viticulture and Enology) program in 1997 to encourage environmental practices that limit the use of chemicals and fertilizers. Today, more than 100 vineyards in the Willamette Valley boast LIVE certification.

Even tasting rooms have gone "green" with Sokol Blosser Winery touting its environmentally friendly paints, flooring, and recycled furniture. Susan Sokol Blosser was one of the earliest winery owners to take interest in the stewardship of the land and her barrel cellar's cavelike structure was the first winery in the country to be awarded L.E.E.D. certification by the US Green Building Council in 2002.

Nearby in Carlton, the Winemaker's Studio burst on the scene with an innovative cooperative production facility. "It's an incubator for smaller producers," said Andrew Rich, owner of Andrew Rich Wines, who is one of ten winemakers who make over 40 different wines at the studio. The winery was built using "green" building materials and techniques and is awaiting L.E.E.D certification.

Meandering south from Carlton and McMinnville, the Eola Hills encompass 15 miles of rolling hills and a dozen or so wineries and vineyards bordering the Willamette River to the east and Salem to the southeast. Long, winding country roads are ideal for some two-wheeled bike power and many wineries offer picnicking grounds and tasty morsels to pair with your wine.

Heading down the Willamette Valley on 99 West through Rickreall and Corvallis, toward Eugene, the valley becomes narrower and the Cascade mountains intersect with the



Coast range. This mostly agricultural community produces not only grapes, but livestock and dairy. Warmer weather brings a longer growing season to the region.

Simple pleasures await wine lovers who are adventurous enough to travel from one end of the valley to the other. With many lodging choices in the countryside or in the larger cities, a weekend exploring the entire Willamette Valley will give a broad perspective of Oregon's first wine regions. With such diverse terrain and many wine varieties within a short 100 miles, the Willamette Valley is the perfect place to begin your wine education or simply hone your skills. And of course, drink some wine.

Photos by: "Frank Barnett and Oregon Wine Board"

Where to Sip:

Visit www.willamettewines.com to request a copy of our touring map, *Guide to Willamette Valley Wineries*.

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