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The Wine Roads of Oregon

From Portland to the rustic hills of Chehalem, great wines, food and hospitality await the intrepid wine trekker.

BY PAUL GREGUTT



Many lovely surprises await first-time visitors to Oregon's northern Willamette Valley, best known as the epicenter of Oregon Pinot Noir. There is the breathtaking landscape, the temperate climate, the frequent opportunities for visitors to chat with winery owners and winemakers. You'll be amazed at the many different ways to tour—by car, by limo, by bike, on horseback. And most of all, you'll discover great wines that are not Pinot Noir.

The number of wineries in the Willamette Valley—roughly 200 and counting—means that every trip you take will be unique. The sheer diversity of the wines on display proves that Oregon is no one-trick wine pony. At many tasting rooms you will discover laser-sharp Pinot Blanc, luscious Pinot Gris, sleek and racy Chardonnay and vivid, aromatic Riesling. At others you'll find more exotic fare—Arneis, Auxerrois, Gamay Noir, Müller-Thurgau, Zinfandel.

Tourism has become a major priority for many wineries, as Oregon comes to grips with its first significant wine surplus in many years. For consumers, this means price cuts on even top-flight wines, and more well-made Oregon wines selling for \$15 and under. It also means you are going to feel very welcome wherever you go. With a little advance planning, chances of a “backstage” tour, perhaps with the winemaker, are excellent.

Help with your advance planning is the purpose of this article. Not to tell you exactly where to go, but to offer some tips on how to make the most of your time, and a glimpse of some interesting places to lodge and to dine.

Day One - Portland

Start in downtown Portland, which is packed with excellent wine tasting and fine dining options. I checked into the dog-friendly Ace Hotel. A hand-crocheted monogram, posted in the elevator, captures the gestalt of the place perfectly. “If you took the stairs, you'd be there already” it advises. With attitude aplenty, the casually hip Ace makes a fine Portland headquarters. Stumptown Coffee and Clyde Common (featuring “domestic and foreign cooking”) are on-site, and the Pearl District—the epicenter for downtown food and drink—is right outside the front door.

Within walking distance are Powell's Books, several museums and some excellent wine bars. Try Metrovino Bistro Bar Bottle for both new American cuisine and extensive wine flights; Oregon Wines on Broadway for intimate seating and a regional focus; or Thirst Wine Bar & Bistro for great views.

If hot weather has you thinking of a tall cool one, Deschutes Brewery, Bridge Port Brew Pub, Widner Gasthaus Pub, Lucky Labrador Brew Pub, the New Old Lompoc and Roots Brewing Company are all nearby.

In recent years Portland has become home base to a growing number of craft distillers, notably Clear Creek, the first and biggest, and a few wineries, such as the Portland Wine Project, home of Boedecker Cellars and Grochau Wines. You may be sorry to leave town so soon, but the Willamette Valley and its wineries beckon, the closest just a 40 minute drive southeast of the city.

For a good regional and travel planning overview, see the Web sites of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association and the Oregon Wine Board. Both offer a wealth of information on individual wineries, the six sub - AVAs, places to stay and eat, special events, tours and other activities. There are also more focused, AVA-centered Web sites, such as dundeehills.org and chehalem.mountains.org, the two I used as part of my own research. Wine Trails of Oregon author Steve Roberts also has a winetouring Web site that is frequently updated. Some general advice: Cluster your winery visits to minimize driving time. As opposed to Napa, where two main roads run north/south and it's easy to navigate, here in Oregon you will be on winding, hilly, rural roads as soon as you leave the highway. Driving seemingly short distances can eat up much of your time and energy. Of course you will drink plenty of water, force yourself to spit (it's really okay with the wineries), and have a designated driver whenever possible.

The busiest tourist times, says Sue Horstmann, executive director of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association, begin with Valentine's Weekend and continue through Thanksgiving. These two holidays, along with Memorial Day, Labor Day and IPNC weekend, are when almost every tasting room is open and special events are planned. But if you prefer to visit when crowds are down, avoid holidays and summer weekends. For a quieter, more intimate experience, early to mid-week is optimal.

When planning my own short trip this past winter, I decided to explore the two AVAs closest to Portland: Chehalem Mountains and Dundee Hills. I included a mix of pioneering wineries, boutiques and brand-new start-ups. I called ahead to make appointments. When you do, ask about visiting hours, special tasting and touring options, and other events that the winery has planned. You'll often have a better experience if they know you are coming, and you'll avoid the disappointment of a "Closed Today" sign at your favorite winery.

Day Two—Chehalem Mountains AVA

Just 19 miles southwest of downtown Portland, I crossed into the Chehalem (sha-HAY-lum) Mountains AVA. Roughly 1,600 acres of vineyard are here, including early plantings from pioneers Dick Erath, David Adelsheim and Dick Ponzi.

I started the day at Rex Hill, now also home to A to Z Wine Works. Rex Hill was one of the first Oregon wineries to bottle single-vineyard Pinot Noirs. Production has been cut from 30,000 to 10,000 cases, and quality is again on the rise. Five or six wines are poured (\$10 fee, free for wine club members). A most interesting "essence table" occupies the center of the room, with a couple dozen Riedel glasses arrayed in a circle, each holding a different herb, flower, spice, fruit, or other flavor component. A sniffer's paradise.

I next headed across the highway and up a steep and winding mountain road to the newly constructed J. K. Carrie winery. The brand was launched in 1999 by Jim and Allison Prosser, but the winery is new, along with its adjoining vineyard on top of Parrott Mountain. The goal is "high acid, smooth tannin, built-to-age Pinots," exemplified by their Provocateur bottling (\$24). "We set out to make wines that get better for the first five years," says Jim Prosser, who has made wine in Burgundy and New Zealand as well as the Willamette Valley.

The afternoon was given over to exploring wineries along Calkins Lane, a short drive west of Newberg. It began at Adelsheim Vineyard, founded in 1971 by David and Ginny Adelsheim. Here you'll find as many as a dozen single-vineyard wines are poured for tasting room visitors. Wine club members taste for free, and special library tastings can be arranged

if you call ahead.

Just up the road is ArborBrook, a charming former walnut and hazelnut farm that now includes a 12-acre vineyard, a tasting room in a century-old nut-drying barn, and case storage in what were once paddocks for the owners' horses. It's a labor of love for Dave and Mary Hansen, who make a selection of Pinots and a gorgeous late-harvest Sydney Sémillon.

Within shouting distance is Lachini, another relatively new Pinot specialist, with 45 acres and an outdoor patio that has one of the best views in the area. A new tasting room is under construction and due to open later this summer; meanwhile check the Web site for special events.

Trisaetum was my next stop. This is a unique winery/art gallery showcasing the exceptional talents of owner James Frey. Set near Beaux Frères and Brick House in the Ribbon Ridge AVA (a subset of Chehalem Mountains), Trisaetum is a must-see. Frey is a photojournalist and painter, and his riveting artwork is on display and for sale adjacent to the winery tasting room. Check out the Fermentation series—paintings that use real vineyard dirt—and the Element series, which incorporates actual vine cuttings into the canvas.

The winery, co-designed by neighbor Josh Bergström, includes such useful devices as a fruit vacuum, to prevent bugs and other MOGs (material other than grapes) from being sent to the fermenters. Frey and his wife are dedicated Riesling and Pinot Noir lovers. "We're going to do everything we can to produce one of the best Rieslings in America," he candidly states.

The first Trisaetum Rieslings are indeed exceptional. The 2007 is already developing flavors of beeswax and petrol, while retaining the honeyed floral character of the young fruit. A botrytised 2008 Lassa Riesling (9% alcohol and 13% residual sugar) is a revelation, with exotic scents of plumeria and orange blossom, a dense mix of fruit, and even a streak of mint.

At the end of this first day there was still time to visit the recently opened Newberg tasting room for Chehalem. "We make wines from varieties we'd love to drink ourselves, should we not be able to sell them" joked Chehalem's Harry Peterson-Nedry, pouring a glass of his light, peppery, estate-grown Grüner Veltliner.

Day Three—Dundee Hills AVA

The Dundee Hills AVA occupies the heart (and soul) of the northern Willamette Valley. This is where David Lett, who founded the Eyrie Vineyards, planted the region's first vinifera grapes. The Red Hills, as they are affectionately known, are now home to 1,700 vineyard acres and some of Oregon's most fabled wineries, including Domaine Drouhin, Domaine Serene, Erath, the Eyrie Vineyards, and Sokol Blosser.

Before heading into the hills, I stopped into nearby Carlton, a beehive of wine-related activity. The first to move into town was Ken Wright who took over an abandoned glove factory. Today there are a dozen tasting rooms within a block of downtown, about three dozen inside the city limits, and many more nearby.

At the Carlton Winemakers Studio, founder Eric Hamacher was my guide. Current occupants include Andrew Rich, Ayoub, Brittan, Lazy River Vineyard, Montebruno, Retour, Wahle Vineyards and his own Hamacher winery.

Since the Studio opened eight years ago, there have been 19 or 20 tenants, including such cultish boutiques as Soter, Scott Paul, Penner Ash and Kelley Fox. "It's like a really exclusive bottle shop that works on behalf of each of the wineries," Hamacher explained.

In the Studio's tasting room as many as 40 different wines are available by the glass or in small flights. On some Saturdays, visiting winemakers lead seminars covering AVAs, clonal selection, cooperage and other topics of interest. An early success was "Soup Night," with guest chefs, family seating and rock climbing classes. "A bit of the tail wagging the dog," says Hamacher. "It generated buzz, but not bottle sales."

The rest of the day was centered in the Red Hills. At Sokol Blosser, a leader in organic farming and 'green' business practices, Sales Manager Michael Brown explained that "the traveler to Oregon is expecting more and more these days. I want to get away from the idea of staff standing behind a bar and pouring wine. I want to take people out in the vines to do

their tasting. We do vineyard hikes every weekend—a five-hour, three-mile loop, with two leaders and catered lunch in the vineyard.”

Vista Hills occupies a site so spectacular that their wine club is named the Treehouse Club. Neighbors are Domaine Drouhin, Domaine Serene and Archery Summit. Three dozen weddings a year are held here. You want to arrive at the wedding in a horsedrawn carriage, or tour vineyards on horseback? Equestrian Wine Tours can oblige.

Almost 25 years ago, Robert Drouhin brought international attention and instant credibility to the region when he established Domaine Drouhin Oregon. Now open to the public, this landmark winery is one of a handful that can offer visitors custom tastings of Burgundies and Oregon Pinots. On the day I visited, Philippe Drouhin, the brother of winemaker Veronique Drouhin, was visiting. He is responsible for all vineyard management on both sides of the Atlantic.

“I don’t think you can make the quality that is not there in the terroir,” he told me. “But the potential you can keep or destroy. With experience you get better at bringing that potential into the final product. We hope to find a consumer that likes the wine that we like. I see tastes evolving [to] wines that are less oaky, more subtle in every way. That’s good for Pinot. Oregon tannins are more subtle than in Burgundy. That’s already a victory for Oregon wines.”

I finished up my all-too-brief tour at Domaine Serene. Here a basic tasting costs \$15, but \$40 (by appointment only) gets you a V.I.P. tour and tasting, with some single-vineyard wines and cheese pairing. Plans are in the works for an even more ambitious option, including a vineyard tour, expanded tasting, and “a more epicurean experience” says PR manager Michele Boyer. Domaine Serene’s much-awarded selection of wines includes a half-dozen Pinots, highlighted by the Evenstad Reserve.

The tasting, vineyard strolling and scenic driving could go on for days, even weeks. To make the most of your time in the valley, be sure to visit some of the restaurants and wine bars featured here as well; all specialize in hard-to find local releases. It’s that flavor of wine tasted within a few miles or even yards from where its fruit was grown that makes wine touring so special and memorable.

Top Wines of this Oregon Wine Tour

- 95 Chehalem 2006 Statement Pinot Noir; \$99
- 95 Scott Paul 2008 Audrey Pinot Noir; \$65
- 94 Trisaetum 2008 Riesling; \$24
- 94 Ken Wright 2008 Canary Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir; \$50
- 93 Kelley Fox 2008 Maresh Vineyard Pinot Noir; \$50
- 92 Adelsheim 2008 Elizabeth’s Reserve Pinot Noir; \$48
- 91 Brittan Vineyards 2007 Gestalt Block Pinot Noir; \$45
- 91 Domaine Serene 2006 Jerusalem Hill Pinot Noir; \$75
- 91 Hamacher 2007 Cuvée Forêts Diverses Chardonnay; \$35
- 91 Longplay 2008 Lia’s Vineyard Pinot Noir; \$24
- 90 Sineann 2008 Red Table Wine; \$16
- 89 J.K. Carriere 2007 Provocateur Pinot Noir; \$24

Lodging & Dining

LODGING

Allison Inn & Spa – Deluxe all the way, with an on-site spa, Jory restaurant, meeting rooms, swimming pool and gardens.

Black Walnut Inn – Surrounded by vineyards, breakfast only. Go here for serenity and views.

Brookside Inn – On 22 acres in Carlton, with 9 suites, gardens, hiking trails and guest chef wine dinners.

Inn at Red Hills – Country cozy, with Farm to Fork restaurant, full-service deli, and Press wine bar, featuring hard to find

boutique bottles for tasting or take out.

Red Ridge Farms – A nursery and garden shop with a single guest suite. Durant Vineyards is the estate winery.

Youngberg Hill Vineyards & Inn – Mountaintop views, an organic vineyard, four suites and four guest rooms. A great location for wine touring.

DINING

Bluehour – a Portland institution with regional cuisine and a thoughtful wine list about one quarter Oregon.

Clyde Common – A winemaker hangout, adjoining the Ace Hotel, with a full bar, late night menu and comfy tavern food.

Cuvée – French country dining in downtown Carlton. Limited local wine list, with some French also.

Farm to Fork – Locally-sourced comfort food served all day. Part of the Inn at Red Hills.

Jory – Elegant restaurant and bar in the Allison Inn & Spa. Excellent wines by the glass with featured wineries and a chef's table.

Nick's Italian Café – Their motto is: "Feeding Oregon's Wine Country since 1977." Still a winemaker favorite. Check out the Back Room.

The Painted Lady – Dinner only. Locally-sourced cuisine, Victorian setting and a very fine Oregon/French wine list.

Thistle – Husband-and-wife Eric Bechard and Emily Howard run this tiny hideaway in McMinnville. Dinner only, chalkboard menu, quirky (fun!) wine list. Overall, a real discovery.

Martha's Tacos in Lafayette (503.864.3304) – The place to go for tacos (and more!) while you mingle with local vineyard workers and winemakers.

Upcoming Events

Portland Indie Wine Fest: May 8, Portland, OR (Just Passed)

Fee: \$75 General/\$125 VIP Time: General tasting 2 p.m.-6p.m./VIP tasting 1p.m.-6p.m. Phone Number: (503) 595.0891. The Bison Building, 419 NE 10th Avenue, Portland.

Fueled by Fine Wine One Half Marathon: July 11

1500 runners will run through Oregon wine country starting on Dundee's main thoroughfare before traveling through vineyards such as Domaine Serene, Domaine Droughin, White Rose, De Ponte and Archery Summit. Cost is \$70 prior to May 11, \$80 thereafter. The race begins at 7 am.

International Pinot Noir Celebration: July 23-25, McMinnville, OR

The 2010 IPNC will host over 60 international Pinot Noir producers and 50 top Northwest chefs for a weekend of tastings, seminars and meals in Oregon wine country.

Bike Oregon Wine Country: Sundays in August, Willamette Valley, OR

Bike Oregon Wine Country takes cyclist through Eola Hills and Mid-Willamette Valley Wine Country. The various routes offer both short and long loops, which range between 45 to 70 miles. Day rides leave every Sunday in August. Start and finish is at Eola Hills Wine Cellars in Rickreall, Oregon, but the route varies each weekend. Lunch is provided at one of many participating wineries, and all wine purchased in-route is transported back to Eola Hills by one of our "SAG" vehicles.

Chehalem Mountains Winegrowers Labor Day Weekend "Explore, Tour & Taste!": September 4-6, 2010

Harvest-time winery open houses, tastings and vineyard presentations throughout the Chehalem Mountains and Ribbon Ridge AVAs. Times and details vary by participant but are generally 11:00 - 5:00 p.m. Tasting fees vary by location.

The Oregon Grape Stomp Championship and Harvest Celebration: September 11-12, 2010

The team who produces the most juice qualifies for the World Grape Stomping Championship in Santa Rosa, CA. To make reservations call 1.800.344.9463.

Southern Oregon Wine & Farm Tour: Ongoing

The Southern Oregon Wine Tour, wineries in the Rogue, Applegate, Illinois and Umpqua Valley appellations open their doors for tastings and gourmet food pairings.