

The Oregonian

Fascinating Northwest Wines are Hitting Their Peak Now

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I've just returned from a harvest-time tour of Oregon wine country and can happily report that we live in the most exciting grape-growing region in the nation. Vineyards are sprouting up at a breakneck pace along with a slew of state-of-the-art wineries staffed by seriously knowledgeable vintners.

I trust you'll be heading out to wine country soon; and whether you plan to brave the crowds over Thanksgiving, hit the road on a quiet fall weekend or simply taste our state's bounty in the comfort of your dining room, I hope you'll find the following impressions of some use.

The south

There's a tourism boom going on in the lower latitudes as Californians cross the border in search of Shakespeare, pristine beaches, Crater Lake, the Rogue River and, increasingly, wine.

Southern Oregon wineries are supported by a constant stream of tasting-room visitors, but look for that to change as new investments turn this region's decreasingly profitable pear orchards into increasingly profitable vineyards.

More competition will breed more distribution, which means you'll also be seeing more Southern Oregon wines in Portland stores soon.

In the Rogue Valley, Del Rio Vineyards grows about 12 grape varieties, including some delicious syrah and cabernet franc. But traditional red blends, sometimes called claret, continue to enjoy success down here.

Don't miss the Velo and Velocity labels from Gus Janeway, winemaker at RoxyAnn, and Weisinger's Petite Pompadour, which is dynamite when you sip it with a bite of red-hot Xocolatl from neighboring Dagoba Organic Chocolate. And newcomer Madrone Mountain in historic Jacksonville makes a Bordeaux-style blend into a port-like Late Bottled Vintage, which is heavenly when paired with a blue from The Rogue Creamery in nearby Central Point.

In the cooler Applegate Valley, Valley View Winery can't keep viognier in stock; I'm looking forward to future vintages, when the winery will source only its own Applegate fruit. Rogue Valley viognier tends to be too high in alcohol for this palate, although EdenVale's Late Harvest Viognier manages to avoid this problem. Made in a dessert-wine style, it doesn't assault the senses with alcohol but rather soothes them with unctuous essence of pear (interestingly, EdenVale is on a historic pear orchard).

On to the Umpqua, where the climate ranges from Wildlife Safari-worthy to Burgundian. On the hot side (near the aforementioned Safari, in Winston), Abacela has pioneered the cultivation of Spanish and Portuguese grape varieties in Oregon. While its stunning tempranillos are well-known, I've fallen in love with Abacela's albarino, a brisk glass of lemon grass, lime, grapefruit and brine flavors. I'm also looking forward to Abacela's future experiments with grenache and Douro varieties.

Amazingly, the other Umpqua producer of special note -- Brandborg, in Elkton -- turns out some astonishingly fine pinot noir and riesling.

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Like the south, the northern borderlands host an amazing array of grapes thanks to a wide diversity of climates, soil types and of rainfall inches. Indeed, the new Columbia Gorge American Viticultural Area bills itself as “A World of Wine in 40 Miles.”

Perched on a high ridge balanced breathtakingly between mounts Adams and Hood, Wyeast Vineyard in Hood River produces dry-farmed gris grapes for wines like Sineann’s zippy, grapefruity Oregon Pinot Gris.

Meanwhile, nearby in The Dalles, vineyards such as The Pines 1852 and McDuffee produce gorgeous fruit thanks to baking-hot days and wind-cooled nights. Don’t miss the rich, plummy The Pines 1852 Old Vine Zinfandel or Mystic’s Cabernet Sauvignon, McDuffee Vineyard. Dominio IV’s Columbia Valley Syrah, a complex puzzle of black currants, toasty blueberries and chocolate, is another piece of proof that this region makes great grapes.

Just across the river, some fabulous cool-climate wines are coming out of breezy Gorge sites. Latitude 46 N makes a jazzy dry gewrztraminer from Celilo Vineyard. And merlot bashers might change their minds when they taste Syncline Wine Cellars’ Columbia Valley Merlot, which takes the typical berry basket of fruit to a higher level with spices and herbs, notably refreshing mint.

In the future, Italian varieties may just make a name for the gorge; check out the offerings from Mystic and Viento for a yummy taste of what’s to come.

Walla Walla continues to be an outstanding wine region, and I continue to be excited about Zerba Cellars, the one winery on the Oregon side of the border. While its stony vineyards are still too young to be properly judged, I can state that Zerba’s Walla Walla Syrah is an intricate embroidery of allspice, cardamom and baked plum tart, finishing with a flourish of black pepper and jalapeno.

The Willamette Valley

Then there’s pinot country. The 2003 vintage (which many wineries are releasing right now) was hot in the Willamette Valley, and many of the wines are as well. If you’re buying a 2003, be sure to check the alcohol level on the label. Anything above 14.5 percent -- a shockingly high number, really -- is going to be pretty unpleasant unless you like your wines super-saucy.

The Eola Hills, cooled by winds channeled through the Van Duzer Corridor, seem to have fared the weather well; I’m particularly fond of the 2003 wines of Cristom and Witness Tree from this region. If you’re looking for a bargain, you can’t beat Firesteed, which makes a supple and balanced ‘03 that will only put you out \$12.

Of course, you can always buy a 2002. I’ve lately been impressed by this vintage as interpreted by Stag Hollow’s age-worthy Reserve and Domaine Serene’s Evenstad Reserve, among many, many others. In the Yamhill-Carlton appellation, Shea Vineyard provides fruit to 19 wineries. An easy way to pinpoint your favorite pinot producer is to buy a baker’s dozen of Sheas and compare them. Right now I’m leaning toward Scott Paul and Raptor Ridge, but I’ll probably change my mind next week. There are just too many good pinots around here.

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But you already know all about pinot noir in Oregon. What's really exciting in the Willamette Valley right now is white wine. If you've stuck your nose in a glass of Tye gewrztraminer lately you know what I'm talking about.

Some terrific and affordable pinot gris are out there this year from boutique producers such as Lumos and Territorial as well as the always-reliable King Estate and A to Z.

Chardonnay, too, has hit its stride and is made beautifully here, whether subtly rounded by barrel-aging or clean and fresh from a steel tank. I've lately come across lovely chards from ADEA, Alpine Vineyards and Iris Hill, to name just a few.

And I'm thrilled about teeny-tiny Twelve, the first Oregon winery to get me really psyched up about pinot blanc. There's a photo of fresh oysters on the 2003 blanc label, which is fitting because I get oyster shells on the nose of this wine. Plus a creamy, lightly effervescent texture with pretty white peaches, delicate citrus and terrific acid on the palate. This is an aperitif (and oyster) wine par excellence. It's a thrilling hint that pinot blanc may have a real future here.

To conclude

We've enjoyed a crisp, sun-soaked autumn, so I'm guessing 2005 will be a terrific vintage. There's just so much for Oregon wine lovers to look forward to. Like, for example, The Oregonian's Holiday Guide to Oregon Wineries, which will hit the stands in the Nov. 15 edition of the paper. Be sure to check it out for even more scoop on our ever-evolving wine scene. Meanwhile, be sure to drink Oregon wine as often as you possibly can.

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