

travel

Pinot Proper in the Willamette Valley

In Oregon's cool and rain-drenched Willamette Valley, the varietal rules.

By Christopher Reynolds *Los Angeles Times*

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Domaine Serene vineyards in Dayton. (Christopher Reynolds, Los Angeles Times)

After spending most of the 20th century as a haven for hazelnut growers and turkey farmers, this territory, about an hour's drive south of Portland, now belongs to the pinot grape and those who admire it.

Stand on high ground in the Dundee Hills, and you see the trained vines march across the landscape, row by row, like a green invading army or the cast of China's Olympic ceremony. About 275 wineries do business here, joined by burgeoning numbers of tasting rooms, restaurants and lodgings.

The nuts and birds are still around — in fact, Oregon still produces most of this country's hazelnuts, also known as filberts. But since Lett and fellow pinot pioneers, including Dick Erath, Bill Blosser and Susan Sokol Blosser, started making wine here in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the way of the grape has been ascendant.

For anybody accustomed to California tasting rooms, this is a different sort of wine country — cooler than the California vineyards of Napa or Sonoma or Santa Ynez or San Luis Obispo County; more suited to small-volume operations; and without a single big, fancy hotel.

Here for three weekdays in September, I paid \$55 a night for a tiny hotel room (bathroom down the hall) and \$20 a day for a rental car (Thrifty, at the Portland airport). I dined without reservations at several well-regarded restaurants. I drank a lot. And one morning, I spent two hours on the back of a Tennessee walking horse, gliding down those vineyard rows and ducking under filbert branches with guide Jake Price. Twice we stopped, tied up the horses and sauntered into a tasting room for a nip.

The Willamette Valley is about 100 miles long, with six sub-appellations, each offering its own microclimate. It is not quite nirvana — not with such cold, wet winters and not with such congestion on the area's main artery, Oregon 99W, around the town of Dundee.

MCMINNVILLE, Ore. — Blame the volcanoes of the Northwest that sent so much lava roaring through this valley about 16 million years ago and set the stage. Or blame the glaciers of Montana for forcing floods, about 14,000 years ago, that carried in so many tons of rich dirt.

Or you could just blame David Lett. He was the 25-year-old who rolled in from California 43 years ago with a trailer full of vine cuttings and a crazy dream about something called pinot. And now the Willamette Valley is never going to be the same.



From top: Lynn Van Horn pours samples at a tasting room; grain silos serve as luxury suites at Abbey Road Farm. Photos by Christopher Reynolds, Los Angeles Times



The Los Angeles Times

TheDetails

GET THERE: From Denver International Airport (DEN), Frontier, Alaska Airlines, Delta, US Airways and United fly nonstop to Portland International Airport (PDX) starting at \$158 round-trip. McMinnville is southwest of Portland on Oregon 99W, about 75-90 minutes from the airport.

STAY: Black Walnut Inn & Vineyard, 9600 N.E. Worden Hill Road, Dundee; 866- 429-4114, blackwalnut-inn.com. Nine rooms on 42 acres. Doubles from \$295.

Wine Country Farm Bed & Breakfast & Cellars, 6855 Breyman Orchards Road, Dayton; 800-261-3446, winecountryfarm.com. Nine rooms. Doubles from \$130.

McMenamins Hotel Oregon, 310 N.E. Evans St., McMinnville; 888-472-8427, mcmenamins.com. Forty-two rooms. Doubles from \$50.

Abbey Road Farm B&B, 10501 N.E. Abbey Road, Carlton; 503-852-6278, abbeyroadfarm.com. Five rooms built into three old silos. Doubles from \$195.

DINE: Nick's Italian Cafe, 521 N.E. Third St., McMinnville; 503-434-4471, nicksitaliancafe.com. Dinner only, Tuesdays through Sundays. Focus is on the five-course meal, \$49, but you can order a la carte.

Crescent Cafe, 526 N.E. Third St., McMinnville; 503-435-2655. Breakfast and lunch, Wednesdays through Sundays. Prices as high as \$12.

Cuvee, 214 W. Main St., Carlton; 503-852-6555, cuveedining.com. Dinner, weekend lunches in summer. Dinner entrees \$19.75 to \$22.

Dundee Bistro, 100-A S.W. 7th St., Dundee; 503-554-1650, dundeebistro.com. Lunch and dinner daily. Dinner entrees \$13 to \$22.

Tina's, 760 S.W. Oregon 99W, Dundee; 503-538-8880, tinasdundee.com. Dinner nightly, lunch Tuesdays to Fridays. Dinner entrees \$22 to \$36.

MORE INFO: Wineries and tasting rooms: The Willamette Valley Wineries Association, 503-297-2962, willamettewines.com.; the Dundee Hills Winegrowers Association, dundeehills.org.

Horseback riding through vineyards: Equestrian Wine Tours, 866-864-5253, equestrianwine tours.com.

The area: Yamhill Valley Visitors Association, 503-883-7770, yamhillvalley.org. McMinnville Downtown Association, 503-472-3605, downtownmcminnville.com.



Lodging options near the wineries include McMenamins Hotel Oregon in McMinnville.

Photo by Christopher Reynolds, Los Angeles Times

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And if you're bringing along somebody you want to impress, a \$55 room at McMenamins Hotel Oregon isn't the ticket. But the commanding views from the 5-year-old Black Walnut Inn in Dundee (\$295 and up) or the 18-year-old Wine Country Farm in Dayton (\$130 and up) will do the trick.

This is "the next Napa, no doubt," says John Stuart, the owner of Abbey Road Farm who arrived from Las Vegas five years ago and raised a few eyebrows by building five luxury guest suites inside three old grain silos.

Of course if you ask a longtime Oregonian about the Napa thing, you probably will get an earful on how this will never be another Napa but something kinder, gentler and more concerned with substance than style.

Meanwhile, new lodgings are rising.

For careful spenders, Comfort Suites opened in McMinnville in October with 66 rooms. For others, construction has begun in Newberg on an 85-room, 35-acre upscale resort called the Allison Inn & Spa, expected to open in August with rates beginning at \$295. And a controversial plan to build a 50-room boutique hotel among the vineyards between Dundee and Dayton has run into opposition from winery owners who say the project doesn't belong on farmland.

I based my wanderings in McMinnville, the seat of Yamhill County. Amid the eateries and shops in the city's old downtown, the McMenamin brothers, creators of a brew-pub empire in Oregon and Washington, playfully rehabbed the 1905 Hotel Oregon into a raffish hangout with bar and restaurant below, 42 rooms above and a bar and patio on the roof. Rates start at \$50, but for a private bath you'll pay \$90 or more.

The biggest attraction in McMinnville proper, by many measures, is probably the Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum (open daily), which has an Imax theater and scores of aircraft, including the Spruce Goose, the enormous wooden plane built by Howard Hughes in the 1940s.

From McMinnville you can make a day trip to the coast (Lincoln City is about 50 miles southwest of McMinnville), hike in Silver Creek Falls State Park (53 miles southeast of McMinnville), book a balloon ride, take a daylong wine-country tour, gamble at Spirit Mountain casino in Grand Ronde (about 18 miles southwest of McMinnville) and browse for garden wares and nursery items at Red Ridge Farms in Dayton.

But if you would rather tuck into Northwest foodie history and a five-course meal heavy on local ingredients, head to Nick's Italian Cafe, which has been a sort of winemakers' clubhouse since it opened in 1977. The dining room is devoted mostly to five-course \$49 meals. (You can order a la carte. But if you want a more casual meal from a shorter menu and without reservations, head for the comfortable bar area in the back.)

Pioneer's vineyard

The first tasting stop is a not-especially-scenic former poultry plant on Northeast 10th Avenue in Dundee. This is where Lett and his wife, Diana, founded Eyrie Vineyards in 1966. David Lett arrived in Oregon by way of the University of California-Davis and planted the first pinot noir and the first pinot gris grapes here. In those first years, he paid the bills with his day job selling textbooks while his wife worked as a teacher.

"Back then," says son Jason Lett, 38, who took over Eyrie when his father retired in 2005, "you could borrow money for a prune evaporator, a walnut-drying barn or a turkey shed" — but not to open a winery.

Now so many winemakers have followed Eyrie's lead that the neighborhood is known as the "Pinot Ghetto." Two years ago Eyrie opened its modest tasting room. It holds about 20 people, and tasters pay \$5.

McMinnville (population about 30,000) and Newberg (about 22,000) are the two biggest cities outside of Portland in the Willamette Valley, but if you're out tasting, you'll soon find yourself in Dundee and Dayton, whose slopes hold many of the area's most coveted vineyards (including those of Domaine Drouhin, Domaine Serene and Eyrie).

Some of the region's best food and drink can be found in Dundee, in a huddle of upscale tasting rooms (Ponzi Vineyards, Argyle Winery) and restaurants (Tina's, the Dundee Bistro) flanking the most congested, one-lane- each-way stretch of 99W.

The Ponzi family was among the area's winemaking pioneers beginning in 1970, and Argyle has won much acclaim with the sparkling wines it makes from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes. And at the Dundee Bistro (owned by the Ponzis), the golden corn beignets with Oregon Bay shrimp made me very, very happy.

In your tasting-room rounds, you probably will pass through Amity, Yamhill and Carlton. In Carlton, which since 2003 has grown from a handful of tasting rooms to 18, I tasted a few wines at the Cliff Creek Winery tasting room on Main Street, and then a few more at the Carlton Winemakers Studio, where nine wineries offer their wares at the edge of town.

I never did find time to make that day trip to the coast, nor did I get to all the wineries and restaurants I wanted to. But really, on a trip like this, that's exactly the problem you want. So thank you, volcanoes; thank you, glaciers; and thank you, Mr. Lett.