

The Insider's Guide to Travel, Food and Wine



Oregon's Wine Country: An Alternative to Napa Valley

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Oregon's Wine Country: An Alternative to Napa Valley

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Who would have thought that Southern Oregon would become the Napa Valley of 30 years ago? But in Oregon, an artistic spirit has always led the way. Even today, Oregon's wine industry is characterized more by small, organic family-run enterprises than by large, multimillion-dollar estates. Three things motivated these wine-making pioneers. First was the promise of fine, Northern European-style wines, and second was the allure of a back-to-nature lifestyle. Most Oregon wineries started as underfinanced, backyard operations where the owners learned as they went along, but wonderful wines have emerged from winemakers who had little textbook training, but plenty of hands-on experience. A third reason they chose Oregon was that it lies roughly on the same latitude as Burgundy, France and has similar weather patterns.



By the 1990s, Oregon wine growing, though still dominated by small producers, entered a new phase, one in which scientific research and capital investment went hand in hand with artistic vision. Grape growers began to pay more attention to their vineyards, viewing them less as a source of raw products. As a result, they began to fertilize less and to use fewer chemicals. The advantage of organic growing is that there are fewer chemical residues in the soil, ground water and the wine itself. The best wines almost always come from small-scale vineyards that produce more concentrated wines.

Surrounded by a vast backdrop of mountains, rivers and green forests, Oregon wine country is small enough that visiting a diverse collection of wineries by car requires anywhere from a 45-minute to a three-hour drive between them.

Our first night was spent at the historic Jacksonville Inn, a bed-and-breakfast with a restaurant that is consistently rated as one of the best in Oregon. Steaks, seafood and specialties such as veal, duck and prime rib are among the offerings to be savored in a Victorian atmosphere of red brick and velvet. A connoisseur's cellar of more than 200 wines completes a meal at reasonable prices. The wine store is a treasure for both gifts and wine purchases. Across the street is a great little restaurant for casual dining called Bella Union that was one of the busiest saloons of its day. The decor brings to mind the images of gold miners out on the town.

Jacksonville Vineyards produces some outstanding red wines, with the 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon and the 2004 claret being particularly good. However, this trip was not all about wine. Flying into Medford, we began to explore mile after magnificent mile of Southern

Oregon's national parks, unique festivals, and spectacular scenery. Oregon wines coupled with organic fresh vegetables and fruits were served in many restaurants. Medford and its surrounding area has become one of the top “agritourism” destinations for travelers. Our visits included historic orchards and farms, award-winning creameries and wineries rich in tradition and taste.

This is also home to the famous Harry and David gourmet country store selling Southern Oregon-grown fruit and other delectable goodies. World-famous pears, mountains of chocolate and gifts to satisfy the richest of tastes—it all began with one man, Samuel Rosenberg, who passed his love of agriculture on to his sons, Harry and David, in 1914. The brothers have since turned the 240 prime acres of pear orchards in Southern Oregon's Rogue Valley into a thriving export market that stretches to the grand hotels and restaurants of Europe. The nearby fertile Rogue Valley is home to more than 35 award-winning wineries and vineyards offering the perfect location for relaxing wine tours and tasting rooms.

Our next stop was Klamath Falls where we stayed at the lovely Running Y Ranch Lodge and explored Oregon's largest freshwater lake. From a canoe, we paddled around Klamath Lake and viewed the largest wintering concentration of bald eagles in the lower 48 states. Following the tour, we relaxed at an old lodge overlooking the lake where we celebrated with fresh seafood and great local wines.

From historic Klamath Falls, we continued our journey driving high up in the Cascade mountain range with a misting of early snow (in October) and reached the crown jewel of Oregon, Crater Lake, the nation's deepest lake caused by a volcanic eruption. From the fall above, there is a thousand-foot drop to the lake, which is 1,932 feet deep and a constant 39 degrees. The color is an unbelievable blue. Crater Lake Lodge (built in 1915) boasts a massive picture window looking onto the lake with a huge stone fireplace and a crackling fire. It's a great place to gather on a chilly evening and sip wine.

Rugged mountain valleys and diverse climates allow for a wide variety of intensely flavored grapes to be grown. The cooler areas produce wonderful Pinot noir, Pinot gris, Sauvignon blanc and Chardonnay while the warmer more arid regions ripen big reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Merlot and Syrah. Many other unique varieties such as Viognier are also produced here. This makes Southern Oregon one of the most diverse wine growing regions in the world with 56 wineries. The Rogue River begins in the Cascades and ends at Gold Beach on the coast. From cool crisp whites to red hot reds, there is a grape for you! The Rogue Valley is rich in agriculture from pear, apple and peach orchards to the healthy wine industry.

Imagine living in a place where the locally picked strawberries can be tasted for breakfast and fresh fish just caught from the river can be enjoyed for dinner? With an emphasis on sustainable organic practices, food producers build partnerships with many of the local restaurants.

Some of Oregon's earliest vineyards were planted in the pastoral Applegate River Valley. It was there that Oregon's first winery was founded, in 1854, by the Swiss immigrant

photographer Peter Britt near the colorful Gold Rush town of Jacksonville.

The Applegate Valley has become one of the best places in Oregon to spend time wine tasting. An overview of these wineries:

The Applegate Red Winery--- one of the most unusual wineries in the state since the owner also raises miniature Sicilian donkeys and Australian rosellas (birds as colorful as parrots). Wines are made from organic, estate-grown grapes and they are known for an excellent Syrah. They have a great picnic site available afternoons and evenings.

The Schmidt Family Vineyards is one of the newer wineries with scenic views and a tasting room that looks out on a beautiful big pond surrounded by flower gardens. Their reds have been getting acclaim along with an individual blend called Soulea.

A silver medal was awarded for EdenVale's 2004 Malbec during the local "World of Wine" event in 2008. The gracious Voorhies Mansion and picturesque property in the heart of pear country is the "place and story" that anchors the Rogue Valley's agricultural history. The stately mansion is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is surrounded by pear trees and vineyards. In a nostalgic setting that blends old architecture with new technology, the tasting room is located in the old carriage house.

Iconoclast, curmudgeon, artist and founder of Troon Vineyard, Dick Troon was one of the pioneers of the emerging Southern Oregon winery industry. He was committed to natural farming and winemaking. His goal was always to produce fine wines that would be the "standard to which all other wines should be measured." Dick recognized that the warm days and cool nights, along with superior soil conditions, would yield exceptional wines. Troon Vineyards has a lovely setting with a Mediterranean-style winery and tasting room. The winery made its name with the unusual Druid's Fluid sweet red wine (a blend of Zinfandel, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon). Today, it is run by the Martin family, who were personally chosen by Troon.

With vines dating back to the 1970s, the family-run Valley View Winery produces powerful Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah that rival California wines costing three times as much. Valley View winery is the oldest winery in the area run by Anna Maria Wisnovsky and her two sons. The family moved to Oregon from New Jersey with four young children in the early 1970s. Shortly thereafter, Anna Maria's husband drowned in a boating accident and she took over running the winery. Valley View is known for its big red wines but also produces good dry whites. Their Barrel Select bottles have graced U.S. presidents' tables for many years. Our hosts invited us to a delightful outdoor luncheon in their vineyards to taste the wines. Fresh organic fruits and vegetables highlighted the meal. However, many of these wineries have a very limited distribution of their good wines and are only available locally.

Nestled between the Cascade and the Siskiyou Mountain ranges, the nearby town of Ashland provides a beautiful backdrop of evergreens and vineyards, half-way between Portland and San Francisco. Ashland is blessed with more than 80 restaurants featuring incredibly talented chefs. Mostly independent, family-owned and run, these restaurants are individual, unique

and a joy to behold! If you love to dine and want variety, this town will delight you. Bakeries produce amazing blends of fresh breads, European pastries, cakes and pies. Locally made Dagoba chocolate, handmade ice creams, award-winning Rogue Valley Creamery cheeses and locally produced jams and vinegars are just some of the excellent food products. The Rogue Valley is rich in agriculture from pear, apple and peach orchards to a healthy new wine industry. Rolling hills, microclimates and the commitment to open space and organic practices all lead to making this area a special place to visit.

Ashland is also home to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which offers plays in rotating repertory performed by the nation's oldest and largest theater company. Since plays are staged in this format, tourists have the opportunity to come for two days and see four different plays in five days.

The Food and Wine Classic in November highlights the bountiful harvest, wines and local chefs who compete in the Chef Showdown competition. Cool nights, much like those of the Mediterranean, contribute to creating one of the world's most diverse wine-growing regions.

Theaters, galleries, restaurants, wine boutiques, people and landscape combine to create a perfect vacation destination. Spring and fall are good times to visit as hotel rates are lower, crowds are less dense and the weather is spectacular. The crushing of the grapes and fall harvesting always make for a fun visit to the wineries.

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