



Land of Plenty

Sample the bounty of food, wine and brews in Oregon's Willamette Valley. BY KARIN LEPERI

FIELDS OF DREAMS:
Wolves & People
Farmhouse Brewery
head brewer Christian
DeBenedetti

PHOTO: © WOLVES & PEOPLE
FARMHOUSE

*Some of the
best (and most
expensive)
Pinot Noir in
the world comes
from the
Willamette
Valley.*

GREAT FOOD, WINE AND CRAFT BEER. Besides all things culinary, Willamette Valley is home to about 70 percent of Oregon's population and is considered the cultural and political heart of the state. It might also be considered the heart of Oregon's food and wine explosion. Named for the river that runs through it, the 150-mile-long sheltered valley is bordered by the Oregon Coast Range on the west, the Cascade Range on the east and the Calapooya Mountains to the south. Starting in the 1840s, this was the destination of many a westbound pioneer family following the Oregon Trail. They were looking for fertile soils and new beginnings. Today the valley is known for its bountiful agriculture ranging from olives, honey, hazelnuts and flowers to grass seed, turf and its world-class Pinot Noir wine — a fickle grape that

responds well to distinctive diurnal temperature changes characteristic of the Willamette. (The valley also produces outstanding Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and other varietals.)

First, to the wines. The region is an agriculturally fertile powerhouse in large part due to the spread of rich volcanic and glacial soils from the Missoula Floods — the last of some 40 floods occurred about 13,000 years ago. The coveted volcanic red Jory soil, most common above 300 feet elevation, is noted for providing the excellent drainage necessary for producing wine grapes of superior quality. That, along with various distinctive microclimates in the valley, create terroir that varies by soil, elevation and exposure.

The Willamette's viticulture uniquely capitalizes on innovation and artful production by mostly family-owned and -operated vineyards. Many farm sustainably and organically. And many tasting rooms define new boundaries in wine and food pairing.

The Willamette Valley became an official American Viticulture Area in 1983 but has since expanded to include six sub-AVAs, with another four pending approval. Those seeking approval from the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau are Mount Pisgah, Polk County, Oregon AVA; Laurelwood AVA; Lower Long Tom AVA; and Tualatin Hills AVA.

This development created international excitement as well as investment. For example, Francis Ford Coppola recently announced his new venture, Domaine de Broglie in the Dundee Hills AVA.

But there's more to Willamette Valley than wine: There's also beer. One of the most innovative is Wolves & People Farmhouse Brewery in Newberg, designated Oregon's Best Brewery by *Outside Magazine*. Founder and head

brewer Christian DeBenedetti uses pure well water with wild yeasts, hops, fruits and house sour culture to bottle small-batch beers. “They exhibit the beautiful wildness of Oregon terroir,” said DeBenedetti.

Salem’s newest brewery, Xicha, fuses Hispanic traditions with edible culture. It specializes in lighter beers, ales and lagers along with creative food takes like smoked trout taquitos.

Those craving Oktoberfest without leaving Oregon find Mount Angel the best option, 18 miles northeast of Salem. Settled by Swiss Benedictine monks in the 1880s and followed by a surge of Bavarian immigrants, the town celebrates the famed Oktoberfest in late September with hopped beers and accordions. Come spring, Mount Angel embraces tulips.

And then there’s the food. The South Willamette Valley Food Trail debuted this spring, featuring foodie stops throughout Eugene and the Cascades area. Another recent entry is Castor Food & Drink in the southern Willamette Valley town of Corvallis, focusing on sustainably harvested and foraged local foods. Executive Chef Danielle Lewis (formerly of King Estates) is someone to follow.

In a field of another sort, the International Association of Athletics Federations World Championships comes to Eugene in 2021 with nearly 2,000 participants representing 214 countries. Eugene is TrackTown USA, the home of the University of Oregon; birthplace of Nike; and a happening place for cyclists, craft breweries and serious foodies.

“As Oregon prepares to welcome a global audience for the 2021 World Track & Field Championships, Eugene and the South Willamette Valley are seeing an unprecedented level of capital investment,” said Kari Westlund, CEO and president, Travel Lane County. “This includes a renewed sense of our innovative strengths as a craft beverage and culinary destination; a center for environmental stewardship and outdoor recreation; and a place focused on changing society and the human condition for the better, whether that is through celebration of human performance, applied sciences or social equity.”

Anticipating the momentous event, downtown development exploded in Eugene and nearby Springfield and Cottage Grove. Additionally, Eugene claims to have some of the best breweries supported by bottleshops, taphouses

CRAFT COMMUNITY:
Xicha Brewing

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and growler fill stations.

Whatever you do, carve out time to visit one of my favorites in the extended Eugene area, just southwest of the city: King Estate Winery. Reminiscent of a Tuscan castle with fields of blooming lavender in the summer months, the estate draws those who love wine, food and beautiful scenery. It also abounds in Pinot artistry — from Pinot Noir to Pinot Gris. With 26 acres of organic gardens and orchards, it represents the ultimate in Oregonian values and organically grown crops, artfully reflected in its wines and restaurant offerings. It’s the perfect place for a romantic celebration.



FALLING WATER:
Silver Falls State Park

PHOTO: © KARIN LEPERI

SCENIC DRIVES

Oregon is known for scenic waterfalls, and the Cascade Mountains offer up plenty. About an hour east of the state capital of Salem, Silver Falls State Park is Oregon’s largest and one of the most popular parks because of its many waterfalls. Walk behind the famous South Falls or photograph it from the parking lot. More adventurous types will want to hike the Trail of Ten Falls, a nationally recognized hiking trail. Or bring your horse and overnight in the horse campground.

For those who like driving Scenic Byways, Willamette Valley is home to three that cover historical and cultural landmarks along with six treacherous landscapes. The difficult decision will be which one to choose. Whether Mary’s Peak to Pacific Scenic Byway, McKenzie River Scenic Byway or West Cascades Scenic Byway, each offers plenty of enchanting vistas and breathtaking scenery along the way. All you need is a car and a sense of discovery.