

OREGON'S WINE COUNTRY

By Suzanne Wright

Home to more than 200 wineries, the Willamette Valley is Oregon's largest and best known wine-producing area. In addition to checking out the wines—particularly the famed pinot noir and pinot gris—I am checking into a series of B&Bs.

In the past, I've had some pretty disappointing B&B experiences. During this trip, I am staying exclusively at a number of Unique Inns, a network on the West Coast that vets its owner-operated member properties. Each inn has a distinctive personality shaped by its owner and I've decided to surrender myself to the innkeepers and let them guide me to experience the best of each place.



Portland's White House (www.portlandwhitehouse.com; \$125-225) is located in the city's Northeast quadrant, in leafy, historic Irvington. Built in 1911, the magnificent craftsman mansion with its graceful columns (inviting comparisons to the nation's capitol) was the summer home of a lumber baron. Exquisitely restored by Lanning Blanks and Steve Holden, the White House has the flourishes of a grand hotel with the personal touches of a B&B like fresh baked cookies on the bedside table. The eight rooms are immaculately clean and graciously appointed with four-poster beds, Jacuzzi tubs, European chandeliers, oil paintings and fine porcelains.

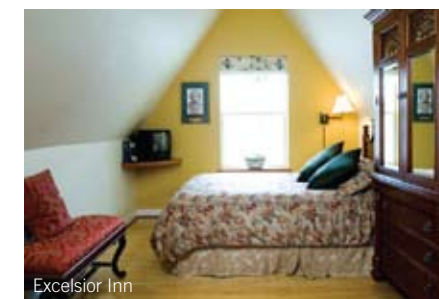
Crossing the Broadway Bridge, I spend the day in Northwest Portland shopping, trying chocolates at Moonstruck, eating a fat burrito at Laughing Planet and noshing a toasted coconut cupcake at St. Cupcake. I have dinner at El Gaucho (www.ElGaucho.com. 3-course dinner from \$75), a swanky steakhouse where the valet expertly steers two of us past a wily panhandler without being rude (Portlanders are nice, very nice). The interiors are sexy, the service is attentive, the Penner-Ash 2005 pinot noir is liquid cashmere, the chef's rib eye with bordelaise sauce and sautéed seasonal mushrooms is plush.

Southwest of the city, the fertile valleys are buffered by the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade mountains. That's where the grapes grow and that's where I am headed.

A snaking driveway leads to an impressive Tuscan-style property built in 2004, the Black Walnut Inn (www.BlackWalnut-Inn.com; \$295-495) with its commanding views of Dundee's red hills. Local artisan details include wrought ironwork and a sun-dappled color scheme of gold, pumpkin and olive completes the theme. A family-run business, mother Karen and daughter Melissa Utz animatedly work the phones to set up appointments at their favorite wineries just minutes after my arrival.

Rangy, gray-haired Cliff Anderson of Anderson Family Vineyards explains that he "dry farms," meaning he doesn't use irrigation, but instead relies on rainfall to nurture the grapes. "We have a lot of spring, a lot of fall and not much summer or winter." A boutique producer, Anderson sells his wine at several high-end Manhattan restaurants, at a local restaurant called The Painted Lady and at the vineyard. Anderson describes his wines as "Burgundian in style," which many Oregon winemakers do; the two regions are on the same latitude. A former marketing executive, his tagline is "steep slopes, deep roots, intense flavors." His 2005 pinot noir evokes cola, coffee and plum.

Next, I visit the Argyle Winery, especially known for its sparkling wines including the 1997 Extended Tirage which The Wine Spectator rated #25 of 100 wines in 2007. I favor the Brut Rose with its strawberry and spice notes. The wine pourer says the rosy hue has been likened to the "color of the eye of a partridge." I take her word for



stellar: the braised rabbit with greens, chanterelles and garlic mashed potatoes, tenderloin with cognac demi-glace, roasted rack of lamb from Su Dan Farms in nearby Canby glazed with port garlic sauce. All are delicious with a Beaux Frères pinot noir.

Breakfasts are a highlight of great B&Bs and the Walnut Inn's is exceptional. Chef/son Kris is a Cordon Bleu graduate and his menu showcases the best local, seasonal ingredients. There's fresh valley apple juice, powdered apple spice donuts, an omelet made with eggs from neighboring chickens and Rogue Valley bleu cheese along with Carlton Farms bacon. Dad Neal and I are doing our best to keep up as the "greatest morning hits" arrive: crumbled fresh pork sausage and rich cream gravy over fluffy biscuits, Dijon and wine-splashed eggs benedict over toast, corned beef hash braised in pinot noir with sautéed onions and garlic accompanied by red-skinned potatoes. I've been eating for an hour and a half by candlelight.

It's winter and it's wet and misty in Oregon—not the best time to visit, but the

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it. Dinner is at Tina's (www.tinasdundee.com; 3-course dinner from \$45), one of the best restaurants in the area. Even if you can't go with friends-in-the-know, be sure and ask for the "secret" wine list, with its prized selection of "odds and ends" bottles. For starters, rake the plump, juicy pan-fried Wilapa Bay oysters through the sorrel mayonnaise and enjoy the East-West interplay of the salmon spring rolls—perfect with a local pinot gris. Just give a price range and the knowledgeable server will recommend a good one. Meats are

upside is I've got most places to my soggy self. The land is restive to the eye, rolling and spacious and green. Oregon vineyards, too, have breathing room: the vines are interrupted by farmland and forested areas. The people also have a cadence of their own: friendly, keen to recommend their favorite destinations. The whistle-stop town of Carlton is the most charming in the valley and provides a day of touring. *Food & Wine* called the Carlton Winemakers Studio the "coolest place in town." It's sleek and modern and operates like a co-



op, with 11 or 12 individual winemakers housed under one roof. All the rage is Riedel's newly-released Oregon pinot noir glass with a big bowl and tulip top; you can taste several wines on any given day from its contours and decide for yourself if it makes a difference to your tongue (debate is raging). The old train depot serves as the rustic tasting room for Tyrus Evan wines, the warm weather varietals—syrah, claret, malbec—of legendary winemaker Ken Wright; Scott Paul Wines is across the street. Horseradish is the place for lunch; they'll put together a Northwest cheese sampler with a proper baguette and you can buy chocolate covered hazelnuts.

Wayne and Nicolette Bailey are the former Midwestern proprietors of Youngberg Inn (www.youngberghill.com; \$170-290) in McMinnville. Surveying the panoramic view and the surrounding vineyards, Nicolette says, "We don't feel like we own it, we just take care of it." Single vintages, Wayne explains, are named for their daughters; I especially like the Jordan

Block. It's foggy and the Wadensil Suite has a fireplace and cozy oak furnishings, so I don a robe and stay in for the night with a bottle of wine and a good book. It's like having breakfast in the clouds the following morning, as I enjoy citrus salad, fresh baked muffins and a savory potato, herb and sausage French toast.

Downtown McMinnville is darling and has a clutch of independently owned shops. One features a t-shirt emblazoned with "ruralsexual;" another, called Honest Chocolates, sells pinot-infused truffles. At Mes Amies, owner Naomi Bruce steers me toward some lesser-visited wineries as I head south. Bethel Heights Vineyard is a

family-owned operation founded in 1977; Marilyn Webb tutors me on sustainably grown wines that carry the LIVE and Salmon Safe designations. When I ask her to expound on the subtle differences between adjoining blocks of grapes, she says, "It's hard to know what is the hand of the winemaker and what is the terroir." She believes that the varietals and the land result in "bigger, more extracted, more lush wines—an advantage to an American palate." The lightly oaked estate grown 2004 chardonnay is a nice balance of acidity and round fruit and the just-bottled 2006 flat rock pinot noir is an appealing combination of raspberries and spice.

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Webb calls ahead to her neighbors at Cristom Vineyards. Winemaker Steve Doerner, who worked in California, talks of Oregon's cooler climate providing greater complexity to wines. Tasting the 2002 Eileen pinot noir with its notes of black cherries, earth and currants, makes me a believer. Witness Tree Vineyards is named for the Oregon oak that bears witness—a surveyor's term—to the boundary of the land. Winemaker Steve Westby uncorks a soft pinot blanc, a peachy, honeyed viognier and a jammy 2006 pinot noir with leather and cassis undertones before I push on to Eugene, where I've got a room waiting for me at The Campbell House (www.campbellhouse.com; \$129-399). Built in 1892, the downtown Victorian estate has been restored by owner Myra Plant. After settling into the Eva Johnson room (four-



poster bed, gas fireplace, Jacuzzi tub, hardwood floors), I head downstairs for dinner. I sample the Oregon-made Cascade Mountain American gin (not bad, a change from wine), I try the flavorful lobster saffron poached wild-caught salmon with barley and bean ragout and a rich chocolate hazelnut and berry coulis. Earplugs have been placed on my pillow to drown out the train which roars past several times during the night.

Breakfast is another fine meal: blackberry scones with a crispy sugar crust, granola with cranberries, pecans

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and almonds, and herbed scrambled eggs tucked into crepes covered in a mushroom sauce. Before I've worked off the day's first meal, it's time for the holiday tea, which features the Hanson Family Singers as Victorian-clad carolers, butternut squash soup, cucumber sandwiches, chicken hazelnut sandwiches and various sweets. Though there are wineries within striking distance—Sweet Cheeks, King Estate and Iris Hill—I'm suffering from wine fatigue, so I spend the afternoon browsing at Fifth Street Market and getting a massage at Pearl Day Spa, then check into the Excelsior Inn (www.excelsiorinn.com; \$120-270). Owner Maurizio Paparo's old-fashioned, onsite Italian restaurant with its creaking floors serves prawns wrapped in prosciutto, lamb with roasted shallots and olives and mushroom risotto. His B&B is the first I've encountered with an elevator—though I need to walk off the calories on the stairs. Nothing exceeds like excess.



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