

# Wine Country Northwest

Where to sip, stay, eat, and play in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

BY LEEANNE JONES



**S**IPPING PINOT NOIR on the deck of Sokol Blosser's tasting room, looking out over vineyards that slope gently down the hillside to a line of evergreens and rooftops, I'm only partially reminded of Napa. ¶ There's that same serenity that comes from being surrounded by such stunning beauty and bounty. But while Napa is more flash, Oregon's Willamette Valley is quiet, family farm focused, and laid-back. Case in point: Sitting across the table from me and my husband is winery copresident Alison Sokol Blosser herself, sharing family stories and favorite valley haunts, her poodle, Twix, eyeing the slices of salumi on the plate in front of me. This must be what California's Wine Country felt like 25 years ago.

The Willamette Valley—which runs through northwest Oregon from Portland to Eugene—has fertile soil and a cool climate suited to grape growing. Vines were first planted in the mid-1880s, but the industry truly took off with the first pinot noir grapes in the 1960s. Today, the valley is home to more than 250 wineries.

With the arrival of top-notch resorts and restaurants, Willamette lures more than weekending Portlanders. It was recently named the third best U.S. wine destination by TripAdvisor (behind Napa and Sonoma), and ranked among the 10 best wine travel destinations in the world in *Wine Enthusiast*. Book a trip now while it's still small enough to rub elbows with winemakers. This hidden gem won't stay that way forever.

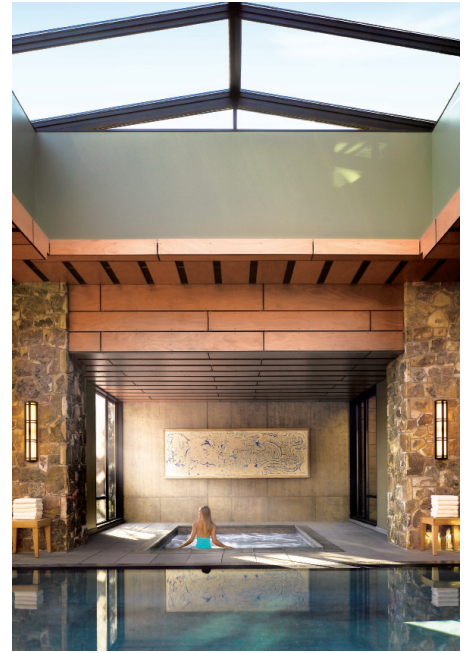
## Sip

Simple wooden birdhouses hang from posts throughout the **Sokol Blosser** property. Like most everything at this sustainability-focused winery, the birdhouses are both aesthetic and purposeful—staff works to help restore the area's threatened Western bluebird.

Founded by Bill Blosser and Susan Sokol in 1971—and now run by their children, Alex and Alison—Sokol Blosser is at the cutting edge of earth-friendly practices. It was the first U.S. winery to receive LEED certification (for its underground barrel cellar) and boasts solar panels, biodiesel tractors, and full USDA organic status. This summer, the winery will open a new tasting room designed to look as though it is growing out of the earth.

The focus on the land is evident in the bottle, too. Winemaker Russ Rosner, who spent 10 years at Robert Mondavi Winery, established a Pinot Noir single block program, capturing the distinctive character of each section of the 85-acre estate vineyard, from the red currant and spice notes of Peach Tree to the earthy black truffle of Goosepen. We particularly enjoyed Evolution, a fun blend of nine white varietals. (It's also a steal at \$15.)

If sparkling wine is more your thing, go a few miles northeast on Highway 99 to Dundee, where **Argyle Winery** offers some of the state's best made in the traditional *méthode champenoise*. At its country cottage-style tasting room and gardens, sample a flight of bubbly that includes the Extended Tirage Brut—listed in *Wine Spectator's* Top 100 Wines of 2012.



### Stay

After a day of sipping, head to the valley's crown jewel resort, the **Allison Inn and Spa**, for a luxurious way to wind down. Opened in 2009 and named after former Lake Allison (the Ice Age flood that gave the area its fertile soil), the chic, contemporary 85-room hotel is tucked away in residential Newberg.

LEED Gold certified, the Allison uses solar power, has a sedum roof, and incorporates small eco-friendly touches, like glasses made from recycled wine bottles. In the rooms and lobby, reclaimed wood and stone, as well as lots of windows, bring the outdoors in, and the works of Oregon artists are showcased throughout the property.

Rain drizzled as my husband and I explored the gardens and vineyards, taking shelter under the blossom-covered arbors dotting the pathways that run through the Allison's 35 acres. Eventually, we retreated to our spacious room, where we savored the scene from a cozy window seat near the fireplace. Considering the ultrasoft bed, six-foot soaking tub stocked with heavenly tangerine-sage Dead Sea salts, and private deck, it's tempting just to stay in the room.

But the spa beckons, with its stunning vanishing-edge indoor pool, eucalyptus sauna, fitness center, and "Pinotherapy" massages and facials, using wine and grape-seed extracts derived from the property's seven-acre vineyard.

When it's time to leave, the Allison's friendly and knowledgeable staffers (who try

## travel

to address every guest by name) offer great tips on things to do in the area, and a fleet of Lexus sedans is available for guests' use.

### **Eat**

Don't leave the Allison without dining at its restaurant, **Jory**. Chef Sunny Jin cut his culinary chops in the kitchen of the French Laundry, and his ever-changing menu, sourced heavily from the on-site chef's garden and Willamette Valley farms and waterways, reflects the same values.

My husband and I savored an arugula, radish, and strawberry salad wrapped with smoked salmon in a sculptural pink peppercorn tuile, and garnished with crushed pistachios. Cedar-planked wild king salmon was tender and perfectly seasoned atop a salad of *Arbequina* olive oil-poached fingerlings, grilled asparagus, and an artistic brush of farm egg emulsion. A petite dark chocolate-Pinot Noir soufflé cake was the perfect sweet finale. Oenophiles will enjoy exploring the 800-label wine list covering the world's best Pinots, and the Allison is set to release its own premier estate vintage this year.

While exploring the valley, spend an afternoon in charming historic McMinnville lined with shops, galleries, and restaurants. **Nick's Italian Café** is a gathering place for area winemakers and serves up a simple but sublime spinach and pork ravioli bathed in sage butter and topped generously with parmesan. Owners Carmen Peirano and Eric Ferguson moonlight as cured meat gurus, and you can order their handcrafted salumi



COURTESY OF SOKOL BLOSSER WINERY



as an appetizer at the restaurant, or buy to go from their **Fino in Fondo** salumeria two blocks away. Try the aged tartufo seasoned with musky Umbrian black truffles.

Speaking of ... Foraged wild mushrooms and truffles are the stars of Dayton's fine-dining destination, the **Joel Palmer House**. Served in the historic 1857 home of the town's founder, the mushroom-centric menu offers *Suillus* soup to black trumpet-topped scallops to candy cap crème brûlée.

### Play

If you're interested in the history of flight, you'll be delighted to know that McMinnville is home to the **Evergreen Aviation and Space Museum**. Wander through the impressive collection of aircraft, from a Wright Brothers 1903 *Flyer* replica to WWII bombers to the *Mercury* space capsule. The highlight for us was sitting in the cockpit of Howard Hughes' infamous "Spruce Goose," which towers above the other displays in the hangar. Kids will love the adjacent Wings and Waves Waterpark, an indoor facility with a wave pool and slides that launch from inside a roof-mounted 747.

Embracing the McMinnville's connection with another kind of flying machine (farmer Paul Trent's 1950 photo of a flying saucer was published in *Life*), McMinnville hosts the **UFO Fest** each May, featuring presentations by UFO researchers and alleged alien abductees, plus a costume parade, live entertainment, and Alienator ale.

Take to the skies yourself, with an hour-long hot-air balloon tour of the Willamette Valley via **Vista Balloon Adventures** or **Pacific Peaks Balloon Company**. Or head down the Willamette River: **Chehalem Paddle Launch** in Dundee is open in summer and fall, and rents kayaks, canoes, and paddleboards. You're bound to spot dozens of native birds, including ospreys, herons, red-tailed hawks, and bald eagles. ■