



DOMAINE DROUHIN IN DAYTON, ORE.

SIDE TRIPS: WILLAMETTE VALLEY WINE COUNTRY

THE LONG AND WINING ROAD

THE REGION'S FAMED WINERIES LIE ALONG A RAIN-SPLASHED, GOLDEN ROUTE.

By Deston S. Nokes

With so many award-winning wineries dotting Oregon's countryside, it's a cinch for oenophiles to make the pilgrimage from Portland to the famed northern Willamette Valley wine country. And the route is simple: Just drive 8 miles (12.9 kilometers) south of Portland on Interstate 5, then take Highway 99W for 12 miles (19.3 kilometers) until you begin to notice a preponderance of both vineyards and blue information signs directing visitors to year-round tasting rooms. You've arrived.

Visitors soon discover that approaching the valley's wine scene is just as uncomplicated as finding the wineries. "This is a youthful wine area, where you'll tend to find the winemaker chatting and pouring for you," says Debra Hatcher, founding partner of **A to Z Wineworks**, which owns **Rex Hill Vineyards & Winery** in Newberg. "This personal touch lets the passion for the wines come through."

Rex Hill is a great place to sample Pinot, a varietal that flourishes with the Willamette Valley's warm days and cool nights. The red Pinot Noirs are rich and multilayered; the white Pinot

Gris are delicate but crisp. Other varietals worth sipping here include Chardonnay, Riesling and Merlot.

Farther southwest, near the town of Dundee, weekend traffic picks up as like-minded wine enthusiasts converge to sample the latest releases. Many nationally recognized names can be found here, including **Sokol Blosser**, renowned for organic farming practices that produce sustainable Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris, and **Argyle Winery**, whose historic tasting room is right on the town's main drag and which bottles world-class sparkling wine made from local grapes.

Dundee also serves as a crossroads in the valley. From here, it's easy to branch out to explore vineyards in and around the villages of Carlton, Yamhill, Dayton, McMinnville and Amity. In Dayton (southwest of Dundee), **Domaine Drouhin's** Pinot Noir is frequently awarded "outstanding" scores from critics, while its Chardonnay was recently named Best New World White Wine by *Decanter* magazine.

Also worth the drive is **Amity Vineyards**, where owner and senior winemaker Myron Redford is an Oregon wine pioneer. While Redford has crafted Pinot Noir for 35-plus years, he also enjoys branching into other varietals. "For instance, we're the first to make a Gamay Noir from French cuttings," he said. "So if travelers are 'Pinot-ed' out, they can come try some Gamay."

Visitors with less driving time need not lament. The **Oregon Wine Tasting Room and Bellevue Market** provides a one-stop tasting venue just outside McMinnville on Highway 18. The market typically offers a range of samples from among 300 wines produced by more than 100 Oregon wineries — some of which are rarely open to the public.