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MAR/APR 2014



\$4.95

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Blazing a trail in
Willamette Valley
Wine Country

Story and photos by Mattie John Bamman

Stoller Winery

Long renowned for producing world-class pinot noir, Oregon's Willamette Valley offers visitors a rich and varied selection of wine-tasting adventures. "People used to come for the coast and the mountains and visit us on the way," says Mich Nelson at Stoller Winery. "Today, people visit specifically for the wine." More than ever, both new and veteran wineries are building bigger, more imaginative tasting rooms to provide one-of-a-kind experiences.

Saffron Fields Winery is one of the most impressive additions to Willamette Valley; opened in September, 2013, it combines modern artworks from the owners' private collection and Japanese-style gardens designed by Hoichi Kurisu, former director of the Portland Japanese Garden. The zen atmosphere invokes a mindfulness ideal for tasting world-class pinot noirs. The winery is unique in other ways, too. "All of the wines feature fruit from the Saffron Fields vineyard," says owner Angela Summers, "but they've been made by a variety of winemakers." Each wine is bottled under its winemaker's label, offering a unique chance to explore how a winemaker's style can affect a wine.

Two of Oregon's oldest and most well-reputed wineries, Sokol Blosser and Ponzi Vineyards, also built designer tasting rooms in 2013. Sokol Blosser built the first tasting room in Oregon in 1978 and knew it had outgrown the space when it had to begin turning visitors away. "We also noticed that some people visit to have fun, while others want to test refined palates in a serene setting," says Marketing Director Michael Brow, "and our main goal is to provide people with the experiences that they want." A sort of choose-your-own adventure, Sokol Blosser presents options ranging from an intimate tasting of single-block pinots in The Library to food pairings in The Kitchen, while Ponzi's new Sherwood

Blazing your own trail...

It's easy to blaze your own wine trail in the Willamette Valley. Get started at any of these wineries:

- >> **Stoller Winery**, stollerfamilyestate.com
- >> **Saffron Fields Winery**, saffronfields.com
- >> **Sokol Blosser**, sokolblosser.com
- >> **Ponzi Vineyards**, ponziwines.com
- >> **Stiltstone Wines**, siltstonewines.com
- >> **Lachini Vineyards**, lachinivineyards.com
- >> **Kramer Vineyards**, kramervineyards.com
- >> **De Ponte Cellars**, depontecellars.com
- >> **Ken Wright Cellars**, kenwrightcellars.com
- >> For comprehensive information about the Willamette Valley wine region, go to willamettewines.com

tasting room provides pure sophistication with leather couches and an outdoor amphitheater.

Not far from Sokol Blosser, Stoller Winery is home to another of Willamette's most beautiful tasting rooms, where wall-sized windows perfectly frame the hillside estate vineyard. While sampling crisp chardonnay, Estate Exclusive Riesling, and single-block pinots, you might see a Frisbee fly among the vines: there's a disc golf course for visitor use.

Perhaps the area that has seen the most development is Carlton, a town where it's not uncommon to see a tractor bouncing down Main Street. In 2013 alone, Stiltstone Wines, Lachini Vineyards, Kramer Vineyards and De Ponte Cellars opened tasting rooms. With such wineries as Ken Wright Cellars already well established, you could spend an entire day wine tasting without even getting into a car.

Another trend in the Willamette Valley is that larger wine producers from around the world are moving in. At the fore is Jackson Family Wines, producer of Kendall Jackson wines, which recently acquired 315 acres of vineyards, mostly in the Yamhill-Carlton area. "After exploring Pinot Noir in California for three decades, it was natural for us to turn our attention north," says Senior Communications Manager Aimee Sands. Though Jackson Family Wines hasn't yet announced plans to build a tasting room in Oregon, the acquisition suggests that wine lovers have even more to look forward to in the Willamette Valley. 🍷



Saffron Fields Architect



Sokol Blosser



Ponzi Vineyards fireplace