

TRAVEL > U.S.

5 Reasons to Visit Yakima Valley, Washington This Summer

Barb Sligl | 6/24/2015

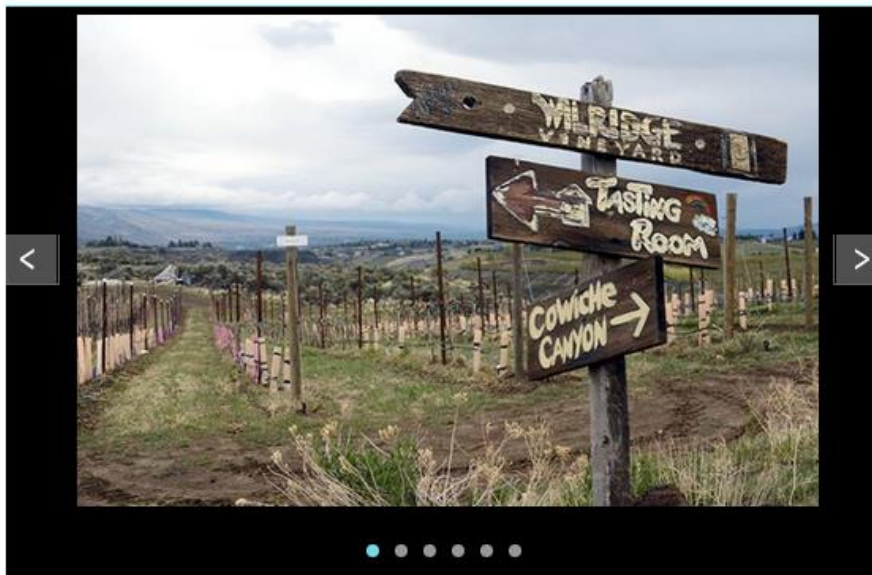


IMAGE BY: [Barb Sligl](#)

1/6 *Yakima Valley offers exploration from wine country to wild country*

Cross the Cascade Range on the 3,012-metre-high Snoqualmie Pass from Seattle and you'll go from wet to dry on the "East Side" of Washington State. But this divide is more than geographical. East and West is very much a state of mind, and as you wind down from the high alpine through the now-arid, sage-brush-dotted and seemingly barren landscape, you start to feel a little of that old Wild West character... of the East. It's only about a five-hour drive from Vancouver to the rolling hills of Yakima Valley, but it feels a world away. Forget the lush, moss-laden and hippie-and-hipster coast, this is cowboy country. And there's a gold rush of sorts going on. The rich flavours of this region are finally being unearthed, quite literally – from hops and IPA to vineyards and sparkling syrah. Here's how to partake.

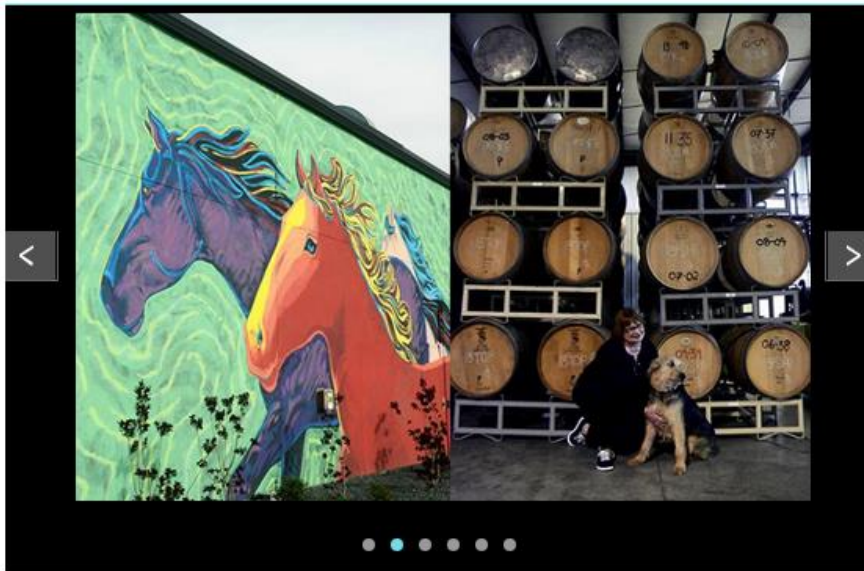


IMAGE BY: *Barb Sligl*

2/6 *Go for the Wine*

Once you're on the dry side of the I-90, the route to Yakima is south on I-82, a road that snakes through the undulating desertscape as if it's one of its resident rattlers. It doesn't look much like wine country, but there are [more than 100 wineries](#) nestled in Yakama Valley, the first and largest American Viticultural Area (AVA) in the state (over 30 years old now, with some 17,000 acres of vineyards), as well as the aptly named [Rattlesnake Hills AVA](#) and same-named wine trail (other evocatively named wine appellations here are Red Mountain, Horse Heaven Hills, Snipes Mountain and Naches Heights).

The go-to grapes are Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Syrah and Riesling. From Spring Barrel Tasting (just what it sounds like) to Thanksgiving in Wine Country, there are wine-soaked events happening year-round. But you don't need any other reason to visit than tasting the wine itself.

At [Vintner's Village in Prosser](#) you only need to walk from wine-tasting room to room – there are eight in one stretch. At [Milbrandt](#), pair a flight of lesser-known varietals like Mourvèdre and Primitivo with locavore fare like lentils from nearby Pullman. Then at [Thurston Wolfe](#), meet the local winery dog and sample the PGV blend (Pinto Gris, Viognier and Orange Muscat... Mmm). In Wapato, there's [Treveri Cellars](#) and its version of "black bubbles," sparkling Syrah. At [Kestrel Vintners](#), named for the smallest American falcon that protects its grapes, there's old-vine Merlot and a bone-dry rosé (more Mourvèdre, blended with Sangiovese and Cabernet Franc). And those are just a few to try. There's almost too much to sample.

Make it easy and taste the diversity at the [Walter Clore Wine & Culinary Center](#), opened in 2014 to showcase the region's wines. There are flights of varietals from different vineyards with handy pairing charts and an aroma wheel, as well as barrel tastings, cooking and even blending classes.

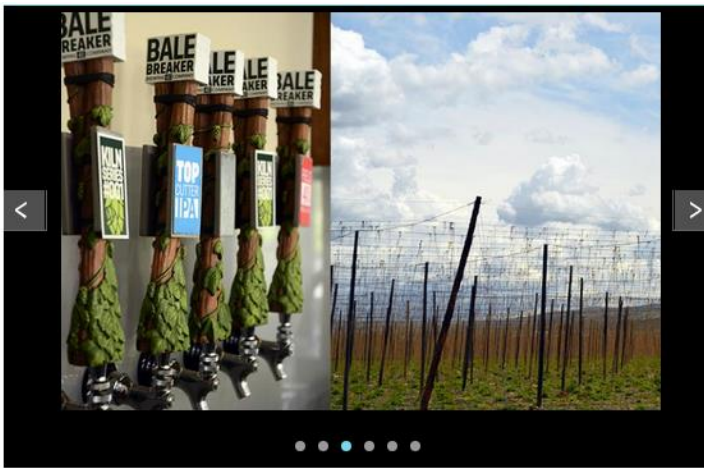


IMAGE BY: *Barb Sligl*

3/6 *Then Switch to the Beer*

If you're not into grapes, you can go the hoppy route in Yakima Valley, which is one of the leading hop-growing regions in the world and produces more than 70 per cent of the hops in the US. It's now also the centre of a growing craft beer scene. And not far from downtown Yakima is hop field #41, the home of [Bale Breaker Brewing Company](#) – right on a commercial hop farm, as it should be.

The namesake Field 41 Pale Ale is duly hoppy, with a lovely bitter-yet-smooth bite. It's the perfect summer brew – think patio or beachside. Or, if you want something more aggressive, Bale Breaker's flagship IPA, Topcutter, really amps up those Yakima Valley hops – a biting mix of citrus, fruity and floral aromas and flavours. The name itself evokes hoppiness; "topcutter" farm machinery removes hop vines during harvest.

Another aptly named brew that relates to local hop farming is Raging Ditch Dry-Hopped Blonde, named for the network of irrigation ditches in Yakima Valley. All this brewing creativity may be new (Bale Breaker only opened in 2013) but the family's been in the hop business since 1932, when the owners' great-grandparents sowed their first hop seeds – one year before Prohibition ended. Forward thinking, it seems!

Other local craft breweries that showcase Washington State agricultural products, from Yakima Valley hops (of course!) to Columbia Valley grain, are [Hop Nation Brewing Company](#) (try the Oat Pale Ale and ESB or extra special/strong bitter called ESBeotch in their tasting room, a 100-year-old fruit-packing warehouse that once stored hops) and [Yakima Craft Brewing Co.](#) (sample the 1982 brew, an homage to the brewing history of Yakima, or Vern, a classic Pacific Northwest IPA).

Continue the beer education at the [Americian Hop Museum in Toppenish](#), which sits amidst hop fields and documents the history of the hop industry, going back to the 1600s. Or continue your beer excursion along the [Spirits and Hops Trail](#). And if beer's not your thing, [Tieton Cider Works](#) offers fresh-pressed hard cider (try the Rambling Route) from apples grown in the Pacific Northwest organically (for the last 30 years!) by third-generation farmers. Sweet.

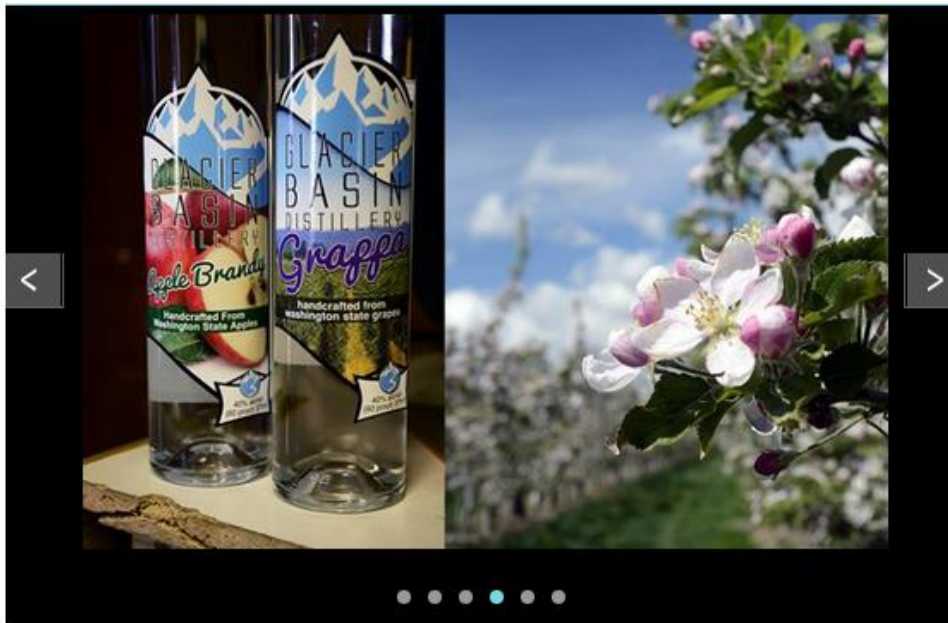


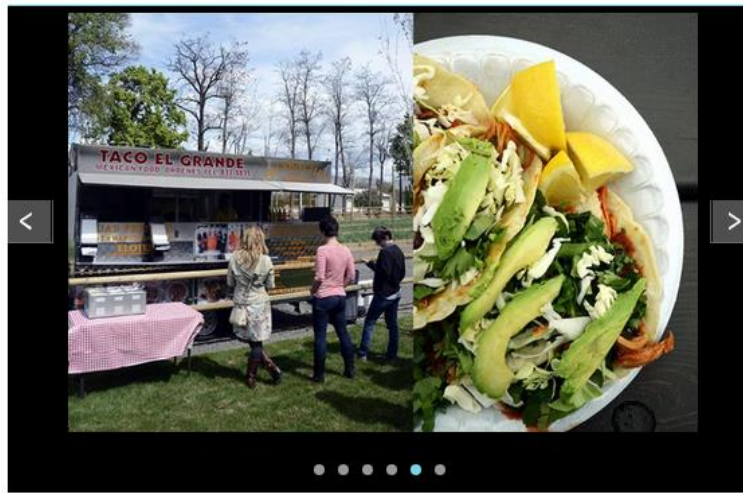
IMAGE BY: *Barb Sligl*

4/6 *And Then to the Spirits*

Wine, check. Beer, check. Now, the next sip to cross off the liquid sampler of Yakima Valley is spirits. And, yes, that's happening here as well, on an orchard, of course. [Glacier Basin Distillery](#) started up less than three years ago as the first craft distillery in Yakima. It now has premium brandies, grappas and vodkas made from locally grown fruit (from trees right outside, on-site at Gilbert Orchards' 100-plus-year-old Hackett Ranch) – apples, cherries, grapes, apricots, peaches, pears and plums.

That sun-ripened fruit is the basis for some serious spirits. The triple-distilled, charcoal-filtered grappa is handcrafted – pressed and distilled – from local grapes. The same process – crushing and fermenting – happens with Granny Smith and Pink Lady apples from Gilbert Orchards for the apple brandy. There's also vodka, distilled from grapes, and Kirschwasser cherry brandy, a German schnapps-like digestif (which has been given the seal of approval by some visiting and in-the-know Swiss-German tourists). And in the future there'll likely be apricot and pear brandies too.

Whatever your "spirit," there's a summer cocktail for it. The distillery's "Apple Buck" is a heady mix of the apple brandy, lemon juice and ginger ale. Or, even better, the "Canadian Kirsch" is a potent-yet-patio-perfect mix of the Kirschwasser, Canadian whisky, lemon juice, ginger ale and cherry garnish. Yum. It's a bit of the farm in your glass. As master distiller, Thomas Hale says, "We're trying to keep the farm feel because that's what we are. We're farmers."



5/6 *Try the Food*

After all the liquid sampling, some more substantial refuelling and fortification is in order. Besides those hops and grapes, more than 40 commercial crops are grown in the sunshine-filled Yakima Valley (300 days of rays a year), including cherries and other stone fruits. Seems there's some rather rich volcanic soil in this valley – add water to that and pretty much anything is bound to grow. Yakima Valley is called the "Hop and Fruit Capital of the World" for a reason.

Back at the [Walter Clore Wine and Culinary Center](#), you can learn more about the local agriculture – spearmint, lentils, hops, apples, grapes – and pick up goodies like local cherries from [Chukar](#). Ruby, Bing, Rainier and Orondo cherry varieties all seem to love the hot summer days and cooler nights and Columbia River breezes of Yakima Valley.

You can also sample those cherries and other regional produce as "Wine Bites" while you sip wine in the [Clore Center's Tasting Room](#), whether it's a local greens salad (from [Buggirl's Garden](#)) or a Raspberry-Cherry Baked Brie Bruleé made with Chukar preserves. Then there are the many food-and-wine pairings going on throughout Yakima Valley at its wineries – whether wine flights with nibbles or charcuterie and cheese plates.

At the [Cowiche Canyon Kitchen & Icehouse](#) in downtown Yakima, you can have roasted artichoke and cast-iron baked squash, paired with local wine, of course – Treveri's Blanc de Blanc sparkling, Naches Heights Vineyard Riesling or Gilbert Cellars' Allobroges. Or Bale Breaker's Topcutter IPA (my choice).

But the best bet, especially when touring and trying to take in as much as possible, is the food truck. And Yakima has a stellar Mexican one: Taco El Grande. You can get authentic pambazos, huaraches and sopas with carnitas. The taco truck moves around, but if you're lucky you'll find it parked outside Bale Breaker for a can't-miss pairing of Field 41 (or that Topcutter IPA) and chicken tacos (on homemade corn tortillas, claro) – with spicy homemade toppings from the salsa bar, por favor.

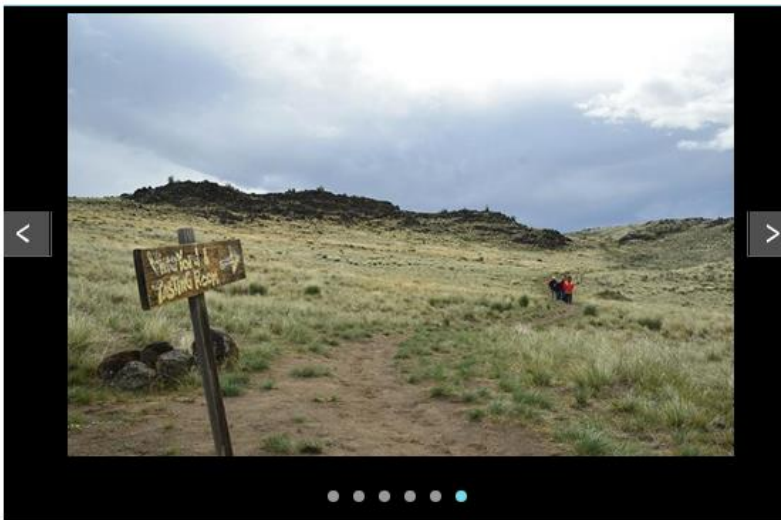


IMAGE BY: [Barb Sligl](#)

6/6 *Explore the Desertscape*

After all the sipping and sampling, it's time to stretch the legs – and burn some calories. And Yakima Valley delivers there too. Make like Lewis and Clark (members of that famous expedition that came through here in 1805) and head to the hills. Easy access into the rolling desertscape (and more wineries, if you must) is available via [Cowiche Canyon Conservancy](#), where sage-covered slopes, gurgling streams, flowering meadows, rugged basalt cliffs and, yes, wildlife (hello, rattlers!) are found just beyond downtown Yakima.

There are 5,000 acres and some 30 miles of trails through this arid-yet-alive land. A short hike along Cowiche Creek takes you past wild clematis and a beaver dam (and you may see a wild minx bodysurfing over the dam, if not a beaver) and spawning steelhead and coho salmon. And butterflies. There's a Project Butterfly initiative each spring, when volunteers help catch and tag big monarch-like migratory butterflies that spend summers in the mountains but came back each year to hatch eggs in Cowiche Canyon, just like the salmon.

If you're feeling particularly hardcore, the [Pacific Crest Trail](#) (of *Wild* fame) passes near Yakima, or you can ascend [Gilbert Peak](#). Back in 1918, Curtiss Richey Gilbert was an avid hiker of the Goat Rocks Wilderness in the Cascade Mountains that rise high above Yakima Valley. He climbed the highest peak there (2,494 m), and it's now named after him. You can scale it too – or join the family's now-annual hiking party. Gilbert's descendants are the owners of [Gilbert Cellars](#) (must-try wine: the Allobroges Rhone-style red blend). Gaze upon storied Gilbert Peak from the 300-acre Hackett Ranch, a former cattle operation, where, besides vineyards, orchards and lavender, you'll also find the [Glacier Basin Distillery](#) (so you can go back to that grappa).

Mountain or desert, the surrounding landscape is calling to be explored, so much so that there's even a local legend of a chief's daughter who ran away to settle here on the shores of the Yakima River, the name of which means "runaway." Another Native American story says that Yakima translates to "beginning of life, big belly and bountiful." Both versions make sense – a getaway in this laden valley offers plenty of indulgence. For most of us, the Cowiche Canyon Trail is enough of an escape and, even better, it connects to the Winery Trail that takes hikers between [Wilridge Vineyard](#) and [Naches Heights Vineyard](#). It's the best of both worlds – into the wild and into the wine. Time for another sample of what Yakima Valley has to offer...