A Lush Weekend

beer, spirits and wine in the Yakima Valley

BY SONJA GROSET

ike many Seattleites, most of my previous trips to the Yakima Valley centered on wine tasting. On a recent trip, the goal was no different. Wine tasting was first on our list. But as we soon discovered, the tasting opportunities don’t end with wine. It’s simply where they begin. Thanks to the fertile fields and orchards that stretch across the valley, winemakers, brewers, and distillers are bottling local crops throughout the year. On our short weekend jaunt, we sipped and sampled our way through Yakima, on to Prosser, and back again.

Throughout the year, evidence of the hop farming industry can be found across the valley. We drove past dozens of fields lined with trellises for growing hops. Hop vines grow vertically, curl around the ropes hung from trellises, to reach upwards of 40 feet. Spring plantings of these rapid-growing perennials are harvested each fall, when the valley is littered with hop blossoms fallen from trucks, and the air is full of the unmistakable smell of this aromatic crop. The Yakima Valley grows about 75% of the hops harvested in the U.S., which have found their way into beer since the late 1800s. The most common varieties grown are Cascade, Willamette and Mt. Hood hops, but there are dozens of more unusual varieties highly sought after in the craft beer industry.

Just off I-82, east of Yakima, the Smith family planted their first five acres of hops in the 1930s. Today, the family’s B.T. Loftus Ranches grow 900 acres, plus some smaller apple and cherry orchards, but hops remain their main pursuit. The current generation continues the hop legacy, but siblings Meghann Quinn and Kevin Smith splintered off from their parents’ farming business and opened a brewery with Meghann’s husband Kevin Quinn. Bale Breaker Brewing opened in the spring of 2013, with just two beers in their portfolio: Top Cutter IPA and Lot 41 Pale Ale, named for the lot number in which the brewery and taproom sit. The trio attended the University of Washington, but after years on the rainy side of the Cascades, they returned to the Yakima Valley. “Hops are in our blood,” Meghann says. Meghann and Kevin Quinn had worked in sales and consulting, while Kevin Smith flexed his brewing muscles at Seattle’s Two Beers Brewing. The brewpub, built to look like a barn, has tables inside, with views into the brewing facility, and picnic tables on the patio outside, overlooking the hop fields. With visiting food trucks on weekends, Bale Breaker makes a great pit stop on routes east; they’re new enough that the off-season food truck schedule is unpredictable, but the goal is year-round food.

Prosser, a town of about 5,000 residents, is an easy and charming home base for a night or two in the valley. With the soon-to-open Walter Clore Wine and Culinary Center, and the ever-expanding Vintner’s Village, Prosser is firmly on the map for wine country tourists. Ten wineries have opened tasting rooms in the Vintner’s Village, including Milbrandt Vineyards, Thurston Wolfe.
Winery and Airfield Estates. Wine pioneers Chinook Wines and popular producers like Alexandria Nicole, Mercer Estates, and Hogue Cellars, also call Prosser home.

We settled into one of four guest rooms offered at the adobe-inspired Desert Wind Winery. Cozy fireplaces warm rooms in the winter, while private balconies offer a chance to soak up some sun in warmer months. The expansive winery and hotel—popular for weddings and special events—offers wine-themed dinners throughout the year, featuring other Yakima Valley wineries. David and Susan Cowan, of nearby Cowan Vineyards, were the guest winery during our visit, for one of the Friday Night Supper Club dinners. The Cowans have orchards and vineyards, in addition to their winery, where they make estate-bottled wines. The evening’s prix fixe menu included a pork loin roast, which paired well with Cowan’s 2006 Cabernet Franc, one of their earliest efforts. The communal table was filled with wine club members, locals, and wine country tourists like us. After a dinner of free-flowing wines, we were thankful our room was located just upstairs.

Desert Wind fortifies guests for a day of wine tasting and touring with a breakfast basket delivered to your door. After downing some French press coffee, and polishing off a couple croissants, we mapped out our day of sipping and sampling, and hit the road. With the Vintner’s Village on one end of town and the tasting rooms of Chinook, Alexandria Nicole and others on the other end, it’s easy to make a loop route.

Kay Simon and Clay Mackey are the husband and wife team behind Chinook Wines. Simon was a winemaker at Chateau Ste. Michelle in the late 1970s, before she and Mackey started making their own wine under the Chinook label in 1983. They purchased an old cherry farm south of Prosser, where the winery is housed today. Their longhaired, grey cat Smoky can be found outside, stalking the property. Inside the 1920s cottage, visitors can taste through Chinook’s portfolio, which includes their Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc, a wine they’ve produced since their very first vintage.

Wine O’Clock, located at the Vintner’s Village, is the most popular dining option in town (though you can’t beat the fried asparagus at Davy’s Burger Ranch). With access to local produce ranging from asparagus in the spring, to apples and pears in the fall, Wine O’Clock makes the most of the surrounding farmland. A wood-fired oven in the kitchen roasts vegetables and bakes pizza year-round. Tasting at the adjacent Bunnell Family Cellars provides a fine aperitif, but their wines are available on the menu as well.

After lunch, we opted for dessert at the Chukar Cherries tasting room nearby. Pam Montgomery bought an 8,000-tree cherry orchard in the Yakima Valley, and opened Chukar Cherries’ first cherry drying facility in Prosser 25 years ago. The storefront offers samples of their dried cherries, along with chocolate-covered cherries and blueberries, jams, canned sweet or sour cherries—perfect for baking—and various nut mixes. We had our fill of samples, plus got lots of gift shopping done in one stop!

Before crossing back west, over the mountains back home, we made one final stop on our last day. The Gilbert family is one of the largest and oldest orchard families in the valley. H.M. Gilbert moved his family from Illinois in 1897 to begin farming the Yakima Valley. While they are largely apple growers, they bought a vineyard in 2000 (it was planted in 1968) and started making wine themselves two years later. Gilbert staffer Thomas Hale, along with the Gilbert family, has started looking ahead to the next product the Gilbers will take from field to glass. It’s a line of spirits, under the label Glacier Basin. Hale is taking the winemaking process full circle, by distilling the pomace (seeds, stems and pulp leftover from winemaking) into a Grappa-style brandy that is clear in color, potent in alcohol (about 80 proof) and has a distinct, albeit faint grape skin flavor. Hale hopes to follow the harvest seasons of the valley, and make brandies using Yakima’s cherries, apples and pears.

From the beginning of our Yakima Valley sojourn, straight through to the end, we had the opportunity to sample dozens of crops from the area’s orchards, fields and vineyards, which had been crushed, cooked, fermented, or distilled. The legacy of farming and winemaking in the Yakima Valley is rich, and the future of brewing, winemaking and distilling is bright.

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Photos courtesy Yakima Valley Visitors & Convention Bureau.
MORE ON CLORE

Prosser is home to some of the state’s earliest grapes grown for winemaking. Beginning in 1917, vinifera grapes (varietals used for wine) were grown in small amounts at Washington State University’s Irrigated Agriculture Research Extension Center. Dr. Walter Clore worked at the center for 40 years, until his retirement in 1976. In the 1960s, he collaborated with microbiologist Chas Nagel on a project to determine the viability of wine grapes in Washington State. Prior to that time, most grapes grown in Washington were Concord grapes, used for jelly and juice. Clore and Nagel testified to the state legislature in 1969 to overturn laws that discouraged the farming of vinifera grapes, arguing that the state could no longer compete with California’s Concord grape business. Where they could compete however, was with wine grapes.

Clore published his studies and feasibility of growing vinifera in Washington in “Ten Years of Grape Variety Responses and Wine-Making Trials in Central Washington.” In 2003, the Washington State Legislature officially recognized Dr. Clore as the Father of the Washington State Wine Industry for his research contribution to Washington viticulture.

The Walter Clore Wine and Culinary Center is scheduled to open in winter 2013. Aimed at promoting Washington wine and food, it will include exhibits on different Washington agricultural industries. There will also be a tasting lounge—offering wines from around the state—and cooking demonstrations. The center will be available to rent for special events, conferences and weddings.

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