

# Sweet Willamette

**The berries are ripe. The wines are wonderful. Follow the backroads of Oregon's Willamette Valley for the most delicious summer vacation you've ever had.**

by **Bonnie Henderson and Sara Schneider**

Gathering Together Farm isn't on the main highway, but it's easy to find. From Philomath, just take Fern Road over the Marys River to Grange Hall Road, and hang a right at the sunflowers. The farm is expecting you — you and the other fortunate few with reservations for one of Gathering Together's twice-monthly seasonal Sunday brunches. Settle at a table on the covered porch, look out over the garden, and wait for the main course: crêpes with caramelized onions and a medley of heirloom summer squash, all of the produce picked that morning.

This is July in Oregon's Willamette Valley — hot, sunny days when everything seems to be in season: all the berries, the tree fruits, the tomatoes and early corn. The valley has long been a source of plenty, shipping hops and wine grapes across the country. But the best of the best — like the super-sweet Hood and Totem strawberries, or the superb wines produced by winemakers longer on passion than on marketing muscle — never leave the valley. To experience them, you just have to be here.



Andrea Gomez

**Seed lettuce growing at Gathering Together Farm.**

## **"We live in the best place in the world for food"**

The Willamette Valley stretches along the Willamette River south from Portland to Eugene, the river curling through gentle landscape dotted with a few bigish towns — Eugene, Corvallis — and many more tiny ones like Philomath and Sublimity.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of travelers zoom through here on Interstate 5. But you don't want to do that. Instead, wind down the east side on State 213, or the west side on State 99W, through rolling open farmland punctuated with stands selling local produce — places like Fresh to You Produce and Garden Center, with its better-than-homemade marionberry jam, or Red Ridge Farms, with more than 100 varieties of lavender.

In downtown Albany, Matt Bennett, chef-owner of Sybaris, starts Saturday night dinner prep at 8 a.m. by walking across the street to Albany's little weekly farmers' market. No white asparagus this day, but he knows he'll find it just down the road at the Corvallis market. Along with fava beans. "They're very time consuming," he explains on the drive to Corvallis, past green fields and the white humps of greenhouses. "You really can't afford to pay someone to shell them, then blanch them, then slip off their leathery skins, all before you actually cook them." So he does it all himself: "Fava beans mean summer to me."

No restaurateur in the Willamette Valley has been dealing directly with farmers longer than chef Stephanie Pearl Kimmel of Eugene's Marché restaurant. Thirty-five years ago, she opened her first restaurant — and quickly realized how limited the local produce selection was for chefs. The only way to get radicchio, it seemed, was to smuggle in seeds from France — so she did, handing them over to a local farmer. When it came up, he tasted the unfamiliar bitter green and judged the experiment a failure. "He plowed it all under before I even got a chance to taste it," she recalls with a laugh.

While Kimmel still slips seeds into her suitcase, the variety and quality of Willamette Valley produce keeps getting better, she says. "Just the diversity — all the different tomatoes, lettuce, peppers — is astonishing," she says. "I think right now we live in the best place in the world for food."

Not far away, the Territorial Highway southwest of Eugene will take you to a July dinner at King Estate Winery. Even the drive is memorable: the low-angled sun heightening the broad and still-green pastures. Suddenly the winery's silhouette, like that of a Tuscan villa, appears on the hilltop ahead.

Executive chef Michael Landsberg, a veteran of high-profile kitchens from New York to Los Angeles, landed here a few months ago after a stint at Marché. It's the next logical step; all the wine served here is made on the premises, and at the peak of harvest, at least three-quarters of the produce served at lunch and dinner comes from gardens just a few steps down the hill from the restaurant.

"The greenhouses and acreage on the estate, the commitment to sustainability," he recites, seeming to count his blessings. "I couldn't ask for anything more."



Andrea Gomez

#### **Jim Prosser at J.K. Carriere winery.**

Over in the old white barn where Jim Prosser juggles his winemaking, you're surrounded by the orchards of Springbrook Hazelnut Farm. It's not the environment Prosser imagined as his destiny, what with a degree in finance and a corporate career. But crises, business and personal, landed him on a decision-making bicycle trip across the country from Boston. And that ended at crush time at Erath Vineyards (whose founder, Dick Erath, was one of the original Pinot pioneers in the valley), with low pay, no benefits, and a huge smile on his face.

Prosser credits his mentors at Erath and Drouhin and other big houses he worked in for his handle on the nuances of Pinot Noir, "that hard-to-get woman." But he has a surprising fondness for the shoestring that he now runs his own J.K. Carriere label on. "Without capital, you can't manipulate wine too much, and the land comes through," Prosser says. "I'm not going to become a Microsoft millionaire from this. But I can buy a couple of pairs of Levi's a year — and some skis."

A warren of relationships, shared spaces, and expertise launches creative winemakers in the valley. The winemaking spaces themselves are often creative. In the hayloft over Jim Prosser's barrels, the bones of a Norse "soul boat" — the work of artist Larry Kirkland — hang, silent paddles moving an invisible someone off to Valhalla.

As you stand, sipping Prosser's excellent Pinots, you may feel that the ghost in the boat is a gratuitous one. After all, Prosser and his neighbor winemakers and farmers and chefs have already found their Valhalla. Right here. On a sweet July day, you may find it in the Willamette Valley too.

<http://www.sunset.com/sunset/travel/article/0,20633,1634500,00.html>

#### **A search for the earth's signature in wine**

This is a special time for Willamette Valley wine too. As local farmers were learning their radicchio 30 years ago, a handful of pioneering winemakers staked out the Willamette Valley for Pinot Noir. Now, a new generation of intrepid individualists have started their own tiny but often exciting operations.

It's the fava-bean mentality and more — a preference for doing all the work themselves. "I saw the difference between production winemaking and hands-on crafting," says John Grochau, who produces his own Pinot — full of dark berries, warm spices, and firm tannins — along with the slightly softer, drink-now Pinot he makes for Aramenta Cellars up on Ribbon Ridge at the top of the valley.

"We're after the earth's signature, a sense of place," explains Brad McLeroy, who, with his wife, Kathleen, left their wine retail business to start Ayres Vineyard & Winery in 2001. "Garage wine" is no cliché for them; the McLeroys work and pour under her parents' house. A sip of their vibrant 2006 Pinot Blanc is like a glass of lemonade at a stand for grown-ups.