



WINE COUNTRY WEEKEND

Head to the Willamette Valley for limited-release vintages, luxury lodging and incredible food.



O'BRIEN CONSTRUCTORS, LLC

At Penner-Ash Wine Cellars visitors can sample wines offered exclusively at their new tasting room.

Ushered in by the sensible but spirit-dampening ritual of turning the clocks back an hour, November can be a tough month to embrace. But recent travels clued me in to an unexpected benefit of days that fall dark before five o'clock: the thrill of arriving at an unfamiliar destination under the cover of night.

Navigating the road that changes from Ninth Street to Worden Hill as you travel farther away from the center of Dundee, I lean over the steering wheel looking for the Black Walnut Inn, which Google Maps™ tells me should be 2.5 miles in. This being pastoral wine country, there are no street lamps or neon signs, just a tasteful (though weakly illuminated) wooden sign indicating the inn's driveway. The Subaru's tires spit gravel as we wind up switchbacks in the blackness, terminating at a grand country estate. Inside, the distance between wooden floor and soaring cathedral ceiling is

great and my footsteps reverberate as I take a look around.

Opened in late 2004, the Black Walnut Inn is pure luxury lodging in Yamhill County—ground zero for Oregon Pinot noir—providing a cushy overnight base for guests drawn to the area's countless wineries and high-caliber restaurants. Massive wooden slab doors lead to rooms outfitted with dreamy four-poster beds, armchairs upholstered in Wedgwood-blue twill and spacious Italian tile bathrooms. In the morning, finally able to extricate myself from the bed of 1,000 pillows, I pull the drapes, step onto my private balcony and drink in the scenic payoff that was invisible at night: a rolling vineyard landscape (the inn sits on 42 acres, nine of which are planted with young vines) interrupted by thick stands of fir and moss-covered underbrush.

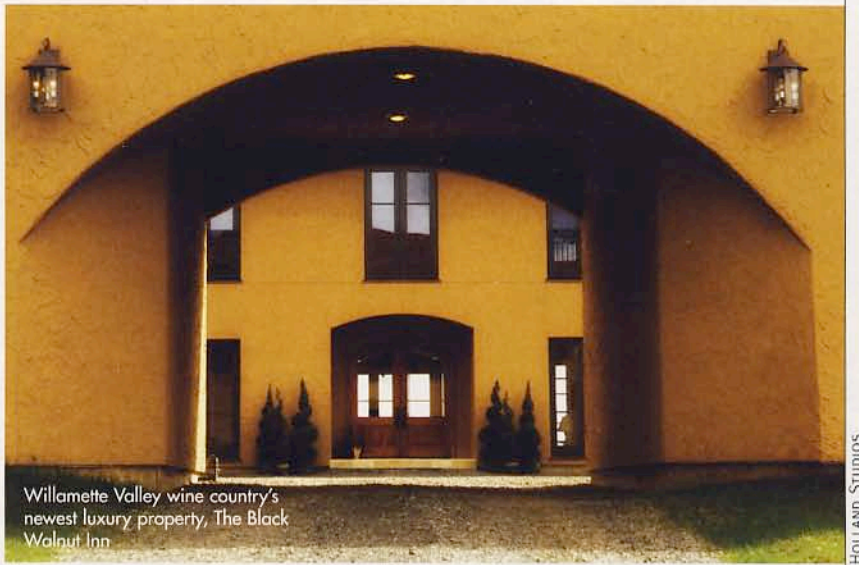
Breakfast is a choice among such energizers as homemade granola and seared polenta with basil and tomato, supplying

fortification for a day of wine tasting. Fruit scones and herbed polenta are tasty but my mind is still on the meal we had the night before. The Painted Lady in nearby Newberg is one of wine country's newest fine dining establishments. Housed in a refurbished Victorian home, the casually classy restaurant offers a three-course prix-fixe menu or seven-course tasting menu—each featuring exquisite, seasonal dishes such as basil-fed escargot, peppery arugula salad with beet vinaigrette and braised pork cheeks over horseradish potatoes.

But there's a time for eating and a time for sipping. A primary advantage of visiting wineries is the chance to try limited-release wines that aren't available in stores or restaurants. We strike out for Penner-Ash Wine Cellars, a modern hilltop facility opened in spring 2005, in hopes of sampling Lynn Penner-Ash's wonderfully aromatic Viognier or zippy rosé, two wines offered exclusively at the tasting room.

Post-harvest and crush, October and November are melow months for wineries, guaranteeing plenty of elbow room at the tasting bar. It also marks the Oregon Bounty Celebration, a program that brings together the state's most beloved products, from the wine, hazelnuts and farmstead cheeses of the Willamette Valley to the Dungeness crab and salmon of the coast to the pears of Southern Oregon and Hood River Valley. New this year are "experience" packages that give you the chance to hobnob with the folks who bring you this incredible bounty. Now you can learn the art of cheese making, cook with top chefs—even become a vintner for the day.

The northern Willamette Valley has the lion's share of wineries but traveling south allows you to witness the power-



Willamette Valley wine country's newest luxury property, The Black Walnut Inn

HOLLAND STUDIOS

ful effect soil and microclimate exert on grapes. We trekked out to visitor-friendly Silvan Ridge-Hinman Vineyards outside of Eugene to continue our wine-tasting education and to stock up on affordable Pinot gris and Pinot noir.

Then we circled back to Eugene to encounter the same Silvan Ridge varietals at The Campbell House. Situated just a few blocks from the walking and biking paths in lush Alton Baker Park, and a short walk from the lively cafés and shops clustered around the Fifth Street Public Market, The Campbell House is beloved for its location as well as its incredible menu, local wine list and thoughtfully designed rooms. But don't race off to your room right away. Hanging out in the comfortable library or at the little bar by the fireplace is a great way to compile a list of recommended area wineries, restaurants and museums from knowledgeable inn staff. Of course, retreating to your room, slipping into the Jacuzzi tub and popping in a James Bond flick from the media library is a fine option as well. —CHRISTINA MELANDER



SUSAN SEUBERT

The Painted Lady serves fresh Northwest fare.

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For more information, turn to "Planning Your Trip," page 72.