

The vineyards of Abeja Winery, in Walla Walla, Washington.
Opposite: The tasting patio at Walla Walla's Foundry Vineyards.



Tasting Wine, the Walla Walla Way

A corner of southeastern Washington known for apples and wheat has also become a compelling wine destination.

RAY ISLE experiences its top-notch Cabs and Syrahs, homegrown restaurants, and refreshingly down-to-earth spirit.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ALANNA HALE**



W W

A A

L L

L L

A A



Just-harvested grapes at Woodward Canyon Winery.

I you want to eat some of the best food there is to be had in Walla Walla, Washington, my suggestion is that you head to the Cenex gas station at the corner of West Rose Street and North Ninth.

That's not a joke. Chef Andrae Bopp has done stints at world-renowned New York destinations like Bouley and Le Bernardin, but for now, this is where he's chosen to run his own restaurant, Andrae's Kitchen. Drive past the pumps, park, walk in. To the left is a blackboard menu and a counter; to the right, a few small tables and the usual gas station stuff: racks of Flamin' Hot Cheetos, tallboys of Monster Energy, an abundance of motor oil. Not long ago, I was sitting at one of those tables talking to Bopp while eating his grilled corn salad (local corn, homemade aioli, cayenne, lime—absurdly good) and short-rib tacos (house-made tortilla, house-smoked short rib, pickled carrot and daikon—also absurdly good). And I was thinking, *Well, hell, this is what Walla Walla is all about.* The only thing I lacked, since Walla Walla isn't just a town but also the most acclaimed wine-growing region in Washington, was a glass of wine.

Bopp, a lean fellow with extravagant sideburns, a sleeve of tattoos, and a hoop in one ear, who chose a logo for his restaurant that borrows heavily from that of the Dead Kennedys—a chef, in other words—didn't intend to open up in a Cenex station. "I saw the space, and it had a hot dog roller, a microwave, a hot case, and that was it. And I sorta like to cook with actual fire. But I asked some of my guys, 'What do you think if we opened a place in a gas station?' They were like, No way. So I asked my wife. She said no way, too. So I came in and told the GM, 'Okay, I'll take it.'"

At one table three young, blond wine tourists were having lunch. At the auto-gadgets rack a guy in hunting camo stood pondering the tire-gauge choices, and at the gas-station register a beefy man in a tank top with frosted tips and sunglasses perched backward on his head was unwittingly channeling Guy Fieri while he paid for a 23-ounce Arizona Iced Tea and some scratch-offs. "So, yeah. Cans of Skoal, WD-40, you can wash your car, get propane...or an insane burger," Bopp said. "It's a great concept. Not that I knew it at the time."

That might go for Walla Walla itself, at least as a wine tourism destination: a great concept, not that anyone knew it at the time. Hunkered down in the southeastern corner of Washington, a 4½-hour drive from Seattle and equally far from Portland, Oregon, the place isn't really convenient to anywhere. Still, wine has been made



NaKenge Adisa makes wine when he's not working as a server at fine-dining restaurant Whitehouse-Crawford.

Downtown Walla Walla sits in a valley near the Blue Mountains.



in the Walla Walla area since Italian immigrants first began arriving in the late 1800s. And since the 1970s, when Gary Figgins kick-started Walla Walla's modern wine era by founding Leonetti Cellar, the first winery in the region, the vineyards have produced great wine: robust, tobacco-scented Cabernets; svelte, layered Merlots; Syrahs that melt on your palate, all ripe blackberry fruit cut with peppercorn. The Walla Walla Valley, which stretches south across the Oregon border, was designated as an American Viticultural Area in 1984, but the town only caught on in recent years, as the push to explore off-the-beaten-path wine regions has driven visitors to unsung corners of the Pacific Northwest. These days a one-hour flight from Seattle gets travelers to Walla Walla with a minimum of effort, which has resulted in a huge boom in downtown and near-to-town tasting rooms, not to mention the restaurant and hotel scenes.

That's a major change, and it's been some years coming. As Dan Wampfler, who runs the winery at Abeja with his wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, said, "A decade ago Main

Street was a lot shorter, and it was a ghost town at either end." We were sitting on Abeja's porch, sipping his vibrant 2016 Abeja Chardonnay. A couple of guests at the high-end B&B Abeja operates were enjoying breakfast in the morning sun as Wampfler described Walla Walla's blossoming. Now there are tasting rooms by the dozen, among them such critically acclaimed producers as Spring Valley Vineyard, Doubleback, and Seven Hills Winery. Top-notch restaurants line Main Street, which is anchored at one end by the new Walla Walla Steak Co., in the town's beautifully renovated old train station. And there is a plethora of wine bars, patisseries, and coffee

shops. “There are probably six or seven venues for live music every night,” Wampfler said. “My wife and I kind of won the lottery for winemakers when we ended up here.”

Now, no one could ever confuse Walla Walla for Napa. Wine is big here, as are apples, but wheat runs the place. When I queried one local farmer about whether he’d ever considered growing grapes, he said, “Hell, no.” How big, I asked, was his farm? “Oh, I’m small. Six thousand acres or so.” Big, he informed me, was more like 20,000 acres. In many ways Walla Walla is still a quiet rural town in an ocean of wheat. Sure, you can buy excellent artisanal goat cheeses (from the irrepressible French-expat cheese maker Pierre-Louis Monteillet) and heirloom tomatoes at the farmers’ market, but you can also swing by Klicker’s general store and buy a 25-pound bag of Walla Walla’s famed sweet onions from a crate by the parking lot.

And Walla Walla still has that small-town interconnectedness. As winemaker Casey McClellan of Seven Hills Winery explained, “My father told me in Walla Walla you should only say nice things, because you never know if you’re talking to someone’s brother or sister or cousin-in-law.” That also means it’s the kind

of place where, when Chris and Island Ainsworth of Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen needed to move to a new space, they enlisted their entire CrossFit group to help out. “They moved the whole place in four hours,” Island told me. “They were loading things onto the trucks faster than we could take them out.”

Yet despite its small-town vibe, Walla Walla is hardly provincial. When you eat at Saffron, the Ainsworths’ *gözleme*, a crisp Turkish flatbread stuffed with house-made lamb sausage, local greens, and smoked yogurt, makes you wonder if you’d somehow teleported to Istanbul. Sip one of bartender Jim German’s sublime cocktails at the new Passatempo Taverna and you could easily be convinced you’re in one of Seattle’s coolest bars, with not a clue that Passatempo’s high-design space was once the Pastime Cafe, a blue-collar Italian joint with a lasagna deal on Thursdays. Head a few blocks outside of downtown, and you’ll find the airy Foundry Vineyards tasting room, which doubles as an art gallery showing nationally known contemporary artists.

But while Walla Walla may have become a place with wine shops selling \$100 bottles of Cabernet, it’s still one where the demolition derby at the county fair is among the biggest draws of the year. “Growing up here, you kinda come up with your own fun,” local Daylan Gibbard told me. “My friends had this place four miles out on Last Chance Road, and we’d make a potato cannon and go out there and lob potatoes at the cows.”

Rick Small, the founder of Woodward Canyon Winery, grew up in a farming family. He also happens to make some of the state’s best Cabernets, and has for more than three decades now. The second winery founded in the region, Woodward Canyon got its name from the school bus route that Small took as a kid. But the Smalls, like other longtime Walla Walla families, were wheat and cattle farmers. “We’ve had family land in Woodward Canyon for three generations now,” he told me in the winery’s cozy tasting room, a few miles outside of town. “On my



Frog Hollow Farm’s Amy Dietrich is the go-to supplier for Walla Walla’s finest restaurants.

Opposite: Hand-cut fries with pulled pork, pickled peppers, and a Crystal-hot-sauce aioli at Andrae’s Kitchen.

**WALLA WALLA MAY
HAVE WINE SHOPS
SELLING \$100 BOTTLES
OF CABERNET, BUT THE
DEMOLITION DERBY
IS STILL THE BIGGEST
DRAW OF THE YEAR.**

mother's side I'm five generations here." Small might have ended up farming wheat himself, but when he was in the Army Reserves he started making wine with Figgins, his friend and fellow reservist. One thing led to another, and in 1981, Small founded Woodward Canyon. (Figgins edged him out with Leonetti by four years.) But when I asked Small whether there were other vineyards around when he planted his vines, he laughed. "Oh, no—this was all wheat, wheat, wheat. I had no water rights, so I was hauling the water up, and I didn't have power either. Everyone thought I was an absolute raving lunatic. Plus I had long hair then. Now I have no hair, but I'm still a long-hair person."

I mentioned that it's strange how long it took the Walla Walla wine industry to get going, given the quality of what's being made. "The thing is," Small replied, "we could have had a wine industry here generations ago. But the Italian immigrants in the area were planting Mediterranean varieties, and they just froze out. Particularly in the 1950s, Walla Walla had awful freezes. Temperatures that went from 70 degrees to negative 30 degrees in a couple of days. During one of them, my dad was up in the mountains hunting, and he said it got so cold so fast that the sap in the branches of the pines froze. Limbs would crack and drop off the trees."

Whether because of global warming or just seasonal variation, recent years in Walla Walla haven't been as brutal. Woodward Canyon's 2014 Artist Series Cabernet Sauvignon, with its lush, black-cherry fruit, radiates the warmth of the 2014 harvest—one of a string of superb vintages that has continued through 2018. Small has had little to worry about, at least in terms of weather. Later, as we stood amid the vineyard rows in Woodward Canyon, a distant high-pitched yipping brought an annoyed look to his face. I asked what it was.



"Coyotes."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about them eating grapes."

"Oh, they'll eat grapes," he said. "Absolutely. Especially Merlot."

Later, at the new Eritage Resort, I contemplated the oddity of Merlot-eating coyotes as I floated, sunglasses on, in the pool. Eritage is a joint project of Walla Walla's Justin Wylie, vintner at Va Piano Vineyards, and hotelier-restaurateur Chad Mackay of Seattle's Fire & Vine Hospitality. It's the first of a series of high-end hotel properties slated to open in and around town in the next few years.

Eritage's rooms all have private decks or patios, the requisite luxe linens, and large tubs in which one can soak pleasantly while considering which wineries to visit the next day—all touches not available at previous Walla Walla hotel options, which have largely run to Holiday Inn Expresses and the like. Eritage is outside of town, surrounded by vineyards and wheat fields. It has a bit of a build-it-and-they-will-come feel, but based on the serenity of the rooms and the quality of executive chef Brian Price's

cooking, travelers would be foolish not to. Price moves adeptly between addictively delicious takes on comfort food, like buttermilk fried chicken with kale-apple-bacon slaw, and more ambitious yet equally satisfying dishes such as roasted Alaskan halibut with a chowder of razor clam and bacon and a parsley-and-bone-marrow salad—a combo that sounds odd but tastes fantastic. Almost all the produce comes from local farms, and if you stop by, say, Frog Hollow Farm the next day, as I did, the whole concept of “farm-to-table” dining pops into life. Frog Hollow’s stand is open daily, and it’s a pleasure chatting with the amiable proprietor, Amy Dietrich, about her Honeynut squash, which Price roasts and serves with wheat-berry risotto and chanterelles—or, more entertainingly, how her first plant sale was so successful that it caused a traffic jam that the cops had to sort out. She still hosts the event every May, offering more than 100 types of heirloom tomatoes, vegetables, herbs, and flowers, along with baby goats for kids to pet.



Farm to table, farm to bottle, farm to people: that agrarian immediacy, in essence, is for me what makes Walla Walla so appealing. On my last night, I had dinner at Whitehouse-Crawford, the town’s longtime benchmark for fine dining, and ended up in a lengthy conversation with my server, a thoughtful guy named NaKenge Adisa. As it turned out, he’d gotten up at six that morning to crush grapes for the two barrels of wine he was making in his basement, before heading over to his restaurant shift. That’s Walla Walla. Amy Dietrich of Frog Hollow also works as an obstetric nurse; Andrae Bopp is a certified whitewater-rafting guide; Passatempo bartender extraordinaire Jim German is an accomplished painter. It’s a town full of passion projects, but without pretense. Adisa told me he’d moved back to Walla Walla from Seattle because the city was getting to him. “Here,” he said, “it’s more people-centric.”

Bopp put it another way when I stopped back at Andrae’s Kitchen on my way to the airport to pick up one of his (again, absurdly delicious) Cuban sandwiches for my flight. “You go to Napa, you won’t see the winemaker behind the bar pouring samples, or the chef working the register,” he said, handing me my receipt. “Here in Walla Walla, you will.” ✕

Ray Isle is T+L’s wine and spirits editor.



From top: Hanger steak with almond-and-caper-berry salsa and roasted potatoes at Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen; the farm stand at Frog Hollow Farm, outside of town; Tricia Rose, a server at Passatempo Taverna.



DRINKING & DINING IN WALLA WALLA

Make a long weekend of it—a three- or four-day trip will give you enough time to experience the top wineries and restaurants at a leisurely pace.

Getting There & Around

Alaska Airlines offers three flights per day to Walla Walla from Seattle's Sea-Tac Airport; on the return leg, you can check a case of wine for free. Rent a car at the Walla Walla airport, or hire a tour guide to pick you up. Chris Wood of **Tesla Winery Tours** (teslawinerytours.com) and Ali Rodgers of the **Touring Co.** (thetouringco.net)—both fun, convivial, and well-connected—can tailor an itinerary to your tastes and budget.

Where to Stay

The top lodgings are just a short drive outside Walla Walla. The new **Eritage Resort** (eritageresort.com; *doubles from \$169*) offers peace and privacy in a luxurious setting (and sublime food in its glass-walled restaurant) and is convenient to wineries both downtown and elsewhere. The **Inn at Abeja** (abeja.com;

net; doubles from \$329) is set in a beautifully renovated group of turn-of-the-century farmstead buildings at Abeja Winery. Be sure to try the excellent wines if you stay; the tasting room is open only to mailing-list customers and inn guests.

Where to Taste

Book a spot at the seated tasting at **Seven Hills Winery** (sevenhillswinery.com) downtown to try small bites paired with wines such as the mocha-scented 2015 Seven Hills Vineyard Merlot. At other top spots—like the cozy tasting room of **Spring Valley Vineyard** (springvalleyvineyard.com) and **Charles Smith** (winesofsubstance.com), a cool-industrial space in an old warehouse—you can just walk in. A five-minute drive away, the nascent “industrial district” is home to **Foundry Vineyards**

(foundryvineyards.com), which has a worthwhile art gallery and sculpture garden, and **Gramercy Cellars** (gramercycellars.com), where you should make a reservation to try Master Sommelier turned winemaker Greg Harrington's world-class Syrahs. Ten minutes outside of town, head to **Woodward Canyon Winery** (woodwardcanyon.com) for Rick Small's gorgeous Cabernets. Other great nearby stops include **Pepper Bridge Winery** (pepperbridge.com) for complex, age-worthy Merlots; **Buty Winery** (butywinery.com), one of several top producers across the street from the airport; and the sleek, modernist tasting room at **Long Shadows Winery** (longshadows.com).

Where to Eat

The farm stand at **Frog Hollow Farm** (froghollowfarm.net) is open Fridays from May to December, but if you write in advance, proprietor Amy Dietrich can arrange a tour of the farm, too. It's also a regular presence at the **Walla Walla Downtown Farmers' Market** (downtownwallawalla.com) on Saturdays. At **Saffron**

Mediterranean Kitchen (saffronmediterraneankitchen.com; *entrées \$27–\$45*), chef Chris Ainsworth channels Middle Eastern and southern European food traditions through local produce. **Whitehouse-Crawford** (whitehousecrawford.com; *entrées \$29–\$44*), which opened in 2000, is still the premier white-tablecloth destination, with a lengthy selection of top Washington wines. At **Passatempo Taverna** (passatempowallawalla.com; *entrées \$24–\$35*), do not bypass the bespoke cocktails. And if, by some unfortunate happenstance or brief bout with madness, you don't make it to **Andrae's Kitchen** (andraeskitchen.com; *sandwiches \$9–\$13*) before heading home, stop en route to the airport to pick up a Cuban or house-smoked brisket sandwich for the plane. —R.I.



The new Eritage Resort.