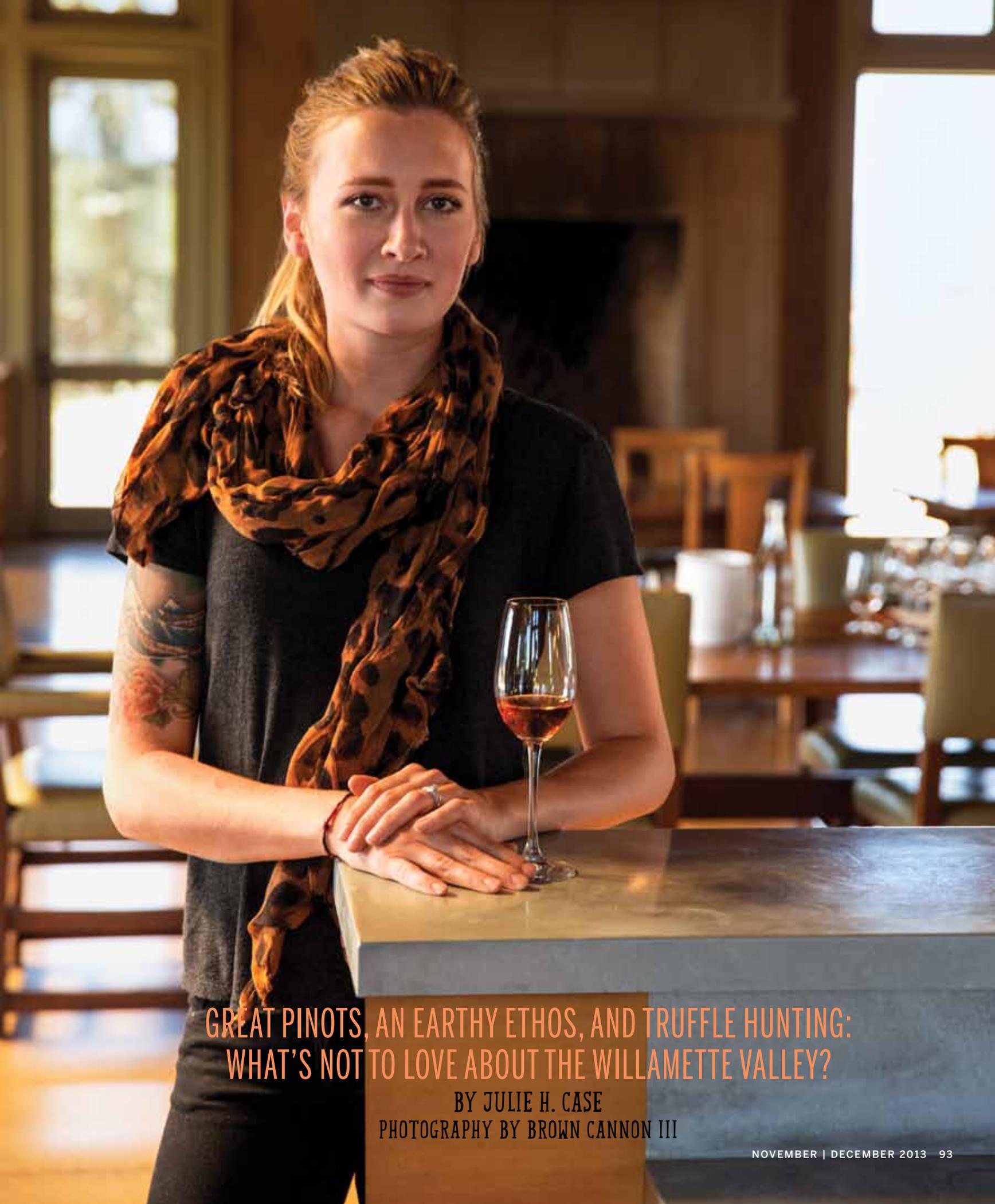


# OREGON CRUSH

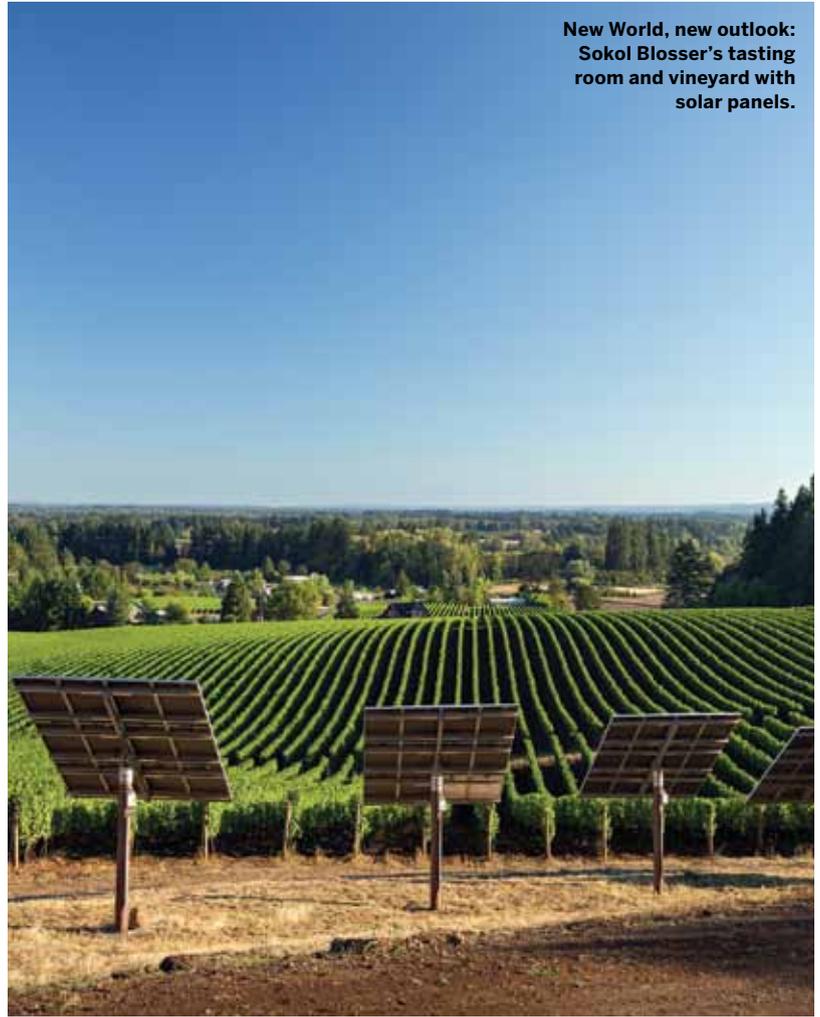


Grape to glass: The Eyrie Vineyards and (opposite) the tasting room at Soter.



GREAT PINOTS, AN EARTHY ETHOS, AND TRUFFLE HUNTING:  
WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE ABOUT THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY?

BY JULIE H. CASE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROWN CANNON III



**New World, new outlook:**  
Sokol Blosser's tasting  
room and vineyard with  
solar panels.

**A**

RIBBON OF ROAD UN-furls between vineyards and pastures. Sustainable wineries stand in the seams of hills. Acres of grapes march across red hills, destined to become some of the New World's greatest pinot noir. This is Oregon's Willamette Valley wine country. I'm here to explore its pinots *and* its Pacific Northwest-meets-Napa aesthetic – eco-chic at its ripest.

Nowhere is the Willamette way more evident than at the new tasting room of Sokol Blosser, one of the valley's founding wineries, in the Dundee Hills. Wooden walls rise like slabs of upthrust earth. The 5,700-square-foot, light-filled space is bereft of right angles, M.C. Escher-esque. Turn a corner and you step from the tasting room onto a patio; descend a stairway and you're in a private room that connects to a secret garden. Winery copresident Alison Sokol

Blosser tells me the space was designed to accommodate tasters' many moods, "whether they sit down in the library for a geeky pinot tasting or head to the porch for outside table service.

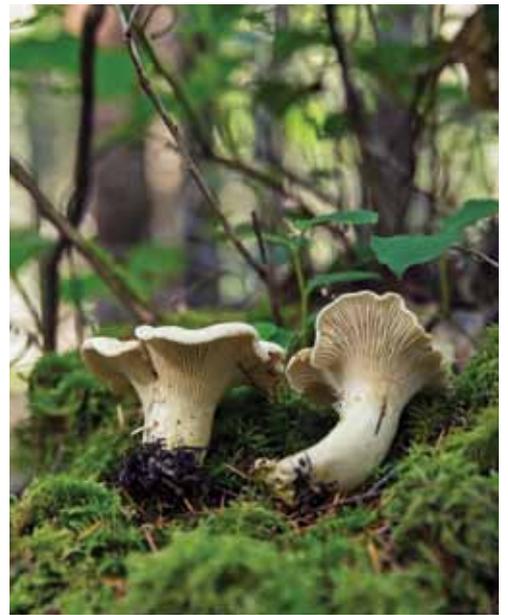
"The Oregon wine industry has grown up so much in my lifetime," this second-generation winegrower says. "We want to be recognized as a wine destination – and for our hospitality."

Wineries like Sokol Blosser, along with exceptional locavore dining, draw visitors to Willamette Valley wine country, about 25 miles southwest of Portland, Oregon. As the third-largest wine-producing state in the nation, Oregon is home to a host of artisanal wineries whose focus is on premium vintages – especially pinot noir, that temperamental varietal that's great when it's good and reminiscent of battery acid or jam when it's not.

The valley, with its 318 wineries, rivals California's north and central coasts as the best pinot noir region in North America. And it's among the top pinot regions in the world, thanks in part to a relatively cool climate and moderate rainfall, which allow grapes to develop complexity. At the same time, sunny summer days provide for longer flavor development than is possible in Burgundy (virtually all French red Burgundies are produced from pinot noir grapes). More than 11,000 of the valley's 15,180 vineyard acres are dedicated to pinot noir. Chardonnay, pinot gris, and riesling thrive in the valley too.

Soil also distinguishes the Willamette's six sub-AVAs (American Viticultural Areas). Basalt turns on the red-fruit flavors; marine sediment imparts black fruit and tannins. And there's the Dundee Hills' Jory soil, a basalt recognizable in the vineyard by its dense, red color; in the glass by the wine's silky texture.

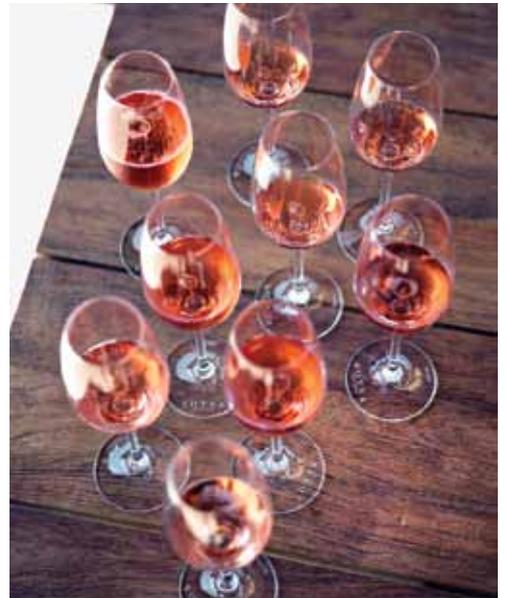
IN 1965 THE EYRIE VINEYARDS' DAVID LETT PLANTED HIS FIRST PINOT NOIR IN the Dundee Hills. In 1979 his South Block Reserve pinot placed among the top three wines



▬

**Willamette Valley bounty (clockwise from top left): The cellar and barrel room at Domaine Drouhin Oregon, Joel Palmer House chef and owner Christopher Czarnecki, white chanterelles, Soter Vineyards' brut rosé, an event at Sokol Blosser with pizzas from Red Hills Market, a Highway 221 relic, pastoral bottle art by Big Table Farm's Clare Carver, and pinot noir grapes on the vine.**

▬



in a French blind competition, the Gault & Millau French Wine Olympiades. Famed French winery Maison Joseph Drouhin took notice: By 1987 Robert Drouhin had purchased property next to Eyrie.

Now, at Domaine Drouhin Oregon, visitors get a taste of Oregon-versus-France as attendants pour Willamette wines and, for comparison, the winery's Burgundies. Oregon pinot noirs, while earthier than California's, are often more fruit-forward and riper than Burgundy's.

At his namesake winery in the Chehalem Mountains AVA, David Adelsheim holds forth on the valley's terroir and its unpretentious beginnings while he pours me a horizontal, single-vineyard flight of five pinots. Each of the wines represented belongs to a different AVA (Adelsheim buys grapes from growers in other areas), and the differences are obvious. A wine from the Chehalem AVA offers denseness and rose petal; one from Dundee Hills is red-fruited, with a slight earthiness. A pinot noir from the Eola-Amity Hills has a fruit-forward nose and is herbaceous on the palate.

This opportunity to taste one varietal across many vineyards, all in a glorious, urbane setting, is a hallmark of the Willamette experience. At Soter Vineyards in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, for example, the barnlike tasting room with valley views is deconstructed Northwest-meets-refined elegance. I take a seat on an outdoor couch with a glass of 2009 Mineral Springs pinot. Hints of cilantro and lavender waft past from the kitchen garden that spirals between vineyard and tasting room. My best discovery, and a nice break from the reds: Soter's pale-pink, effervescent brut rosé.

NOT ALL BOUNTY IN THE VALLEY IS wine. Truffles grow here too. In a copse of Douglas fir trees just outside the town of Dayton, Jack Czarnecki, a James Beard Award-winning cookbook author and the founder of Oregon Truffle Oil, reveals how to find the prized fungi.

We look for small pits dug by hungry squirrels attracted to the pungent gas the truffles release. I rake off a layer of forest duff – careful not to tear up tree roots – and uncover white truffles, some hardly bigger than a pinhead, one as large as a golf ball.



Foraging for fun and profit: Jack Czarnecki hunts for chanterelle mushrooms.

## WILLAMETTE WAY

Take a taste tour of Oregon's most delicious valley.

**GO** Virtuoso's on-site tour operator in the Northwest organizes custom private tours of **Oregon's wine country** (and truffle hunts too). Among the options: a four-day culinary outing that sandwiches Willamette Valley wine touring between a salmon-fishing trip and microbrew tasting in Portland.

**STAY** Situated in downtown Portland in the building that once housed department store Meier & Frank (where Clark Gable sold ties), **the Nines** incorporates art and fashion alongside sustainable design. The 331 rooms with Tiffany blue accents surround

a lounge. *Doubles from \$299, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

**SIP** **Sokol Blosser** 5000 NE Sokol Blosser Lane, Dayton; 503/864-2282; [www.sokolblosser.com](http://www.sokolblosser.com)

● **Domaine Drouhin Oregon** 6750 NE Breyman Orchards Road, Dayton; 503/864-2700; [www.domainedrouhin.com](http://www.domainedrouhin.com)

● **Adelsheim Vineyard** 16800 NE Calkins Lane, Newberg; 503/538-3652; [www.adelsheim.com](http://www.adelsheim.com)

● **Soter Vineyards** (open by reservation only) 10880 NE Mineral Springs Road, Carlton; 503/662-5600; [www.sotervineyards.com](http://www.sotervineyards.com)

● **Big Table Farm** 26851 NW Williams Canyon Road, Gaston; 503/662-3129; [www.bigtablefarm.com](http://www.bigtablefarm.com)

**DINE** **The Joel Palmer House** 600 Ferry Street, Dayton; 503/864-2995; [www.joelpalmerhouse.com](http://www.joelpalmerhouse.com)

● **Jory** 2525 Allison Lane, Newberg; 503/554-2526; [www.theallison.com](http://www.theallison.com)

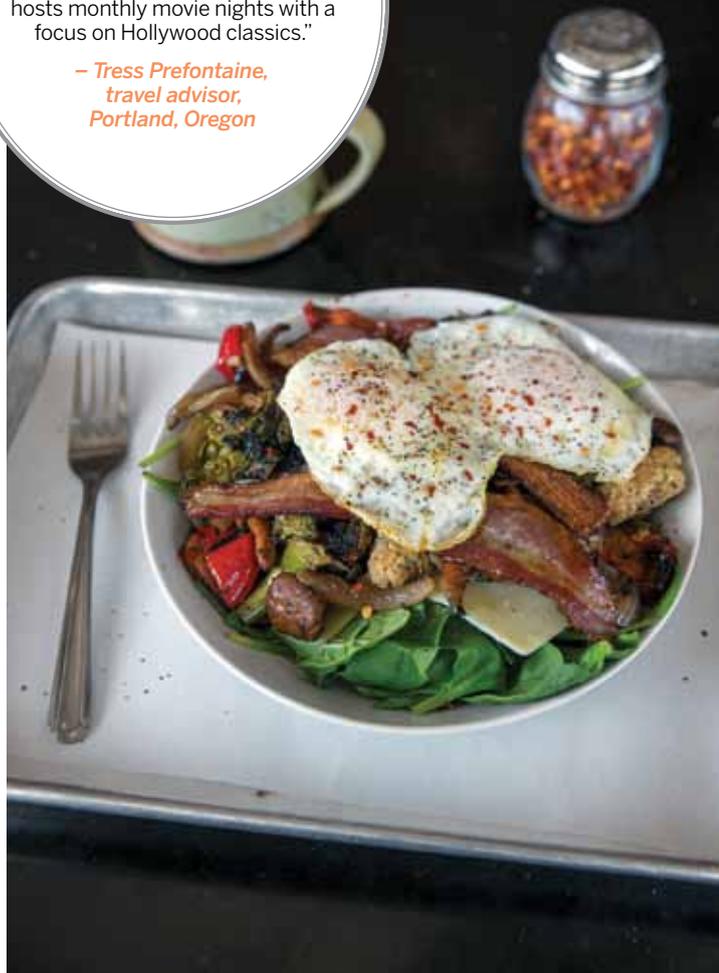
● **Red Hills Market** 155 SW 7th Street, Dundee; 971/832-8414; [www.redhillsmarket.com](http://www.redhillsmarket.com)

● **Nick's Italian Café** 521 NE 3rd Street, McMinnville; 503/434-4471; [www.nicksitaliancafe.com](http://www.nicksitaliancafe.com)

## tip

"Ardiri Winery & Vineyards in the foothills of the Chehalem Mountains hosts monthly movie nights with a focus on Hollywood classics."

– Tress Prefontaine,  
travel advisor,  
Portland, Oregon



Clare Carver at Big Table Farm and (left) a Red Hills Market breakfast bowl.

Truffles like these – as well as morels, porcini, and chanterelles – appear on the dinner menu at The Joel Palmer House, where Jack's son Chris is chef and owner. A wild mushroom soup precedes a three-mushroom tart that arrives in dense, dark slices. An icy "martini" made with maple-scented candy cap mushrooms follows.

There's more great food in the valley. At Jory restaurant in Newberg, cherrywood from a nearby orchard fuels a kitchen grill; zucchini from the restaurant's garden and

Oregon coast albacore appear on the plate. In Dundee, the new Red Hills Market serves stone-oven pizzas and sandwiches for wine touring. And in McMinnville, on any given night, the region's founding winemakers gather in the back room at Nick's Italian Café, known for not only its food but also its legacy: The restaurant was born in 1977 alongside the Oregon wine industry.

DUST SWIRLS UP FROM THE GRAVEL as I descend through Oregon greenery to

Big Table Farm winery. Picnic tables are set for a winemaker dinner beneath trees hung with lights. A butter-yellow farmhouse, surrounded by a cow pasture, a chicken coop, and a barn full of hay, serves as Big Table's tasting room and dinner party setting.

Clare Carver and Brian Marcy, who arrived here in 2006, chose the Willamette for its proximity to Portland. It's where they can raise their own food and fill a table with it, surrounded by winery patrons and local friends. Marcy's balanced wines express the terroir of the vineyards, and Carver's artwork decorates the bottle labels.

The couple also chose the valley for its pinot – that delicate, fickle varietal that promises great success or abject failure, and, like the Willamette, is loaded with complexity and finesse. VI

## WHAT TO DRINK

Tasters acclimating to pinot noir should try the Willamette's 2009 vintages. The exceptionally warm year made for **ripe, fruit-forward** wines. On the other hand, 2010 and 2011 were among the cooler years on record, making for more **herbaceous and earthy** wines with much lower fruit and alcohol levels.