

earth and elegance

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This page: Sokol Blosser has over a dozen birdhouses, as part of the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project, and has fledged over 250 hatchlings. "We love having them in the vineyard," says founder Susan Sokol Blosser. "They're voracious insect eaters. They snap up bugs in mid-air." Opposite page: Portland- and New-York-based Allied Works Architecture designed the winery's new landmark tasting room.



The Tennessee Walker prances along the vineyard's edge, stamping the deep, ruddy soil that makes Oregon's pinot noir world famous. "Now turn," says Jake Price, owner of Equestrian Wine Tours, "and go!" Our horses break into a trot, streaming up the rows. Unable to resist, I shift in the saddle and snag some grapes. Best. Vineyard Crawl. Ever.

Napa, step aside. Quiet, quirky Willamette Valley ("Wil-LAMM-ette") — just south of Portland, Oregon — has shucked off her glasses and let down her hair. Va-va-va-VOOM!

This wine region has been giving California a run for its money on many fronts, from soft adventures to gourmet, locavore dining and award-sweeping wines that balance fruit with foresty flavors. The Allison Inn & Spa, opened five years ago, brought the area its first destination hotel, which has now been paired with a landmark tasting room at Sokol Blosser.

The family-run estate has deep roots: these Northwest wine pioneers put in the state's first purposefully built sipping space in 1978. Thirty-five years later, they took things up another notch, with a new, iconic cedar structure, echoing the furrows and sheaves of the lush landscape. Designed by Architect Brad

Cloepfil, whose family owns a nearby orchard, it resembles a wood-carved modernist maze, pierced by light. "It's the valley's first piece of contemporary architecture that really responds to where it is — to landscape, earth and light," he says.

An immediate favorite among critics and judges, the sleek building is celebrating its first birthday. But this internationally acclaimed tasting room strikes just one note in the complex chord of Sokol Blosser, a winery that hopes to make its entire business sustainable as the second generation grasps the baton.

Fire & Ice

Like all vineyards, the Sokol Blosser story starts with geology. Lava once blanketed this area, but the rock layer stagger-stepped, as the North American tectonic plate slipped under the Pacific one, five million years ago. This rippled up the Coast Mountain Range, which shelters Willamette from the Pacific's spray, and also the Dundee Hills, where Sokol Blosser now sits.

"During the glacial age, a vast ice dam broke: Pushing with the force of every river on earth combined, the Missoula Flood poured east for two days," explains Michael Kelly Brown, the winery's director of consumer sales. "The deluge picked up topsoil in Montana and rushed it to the Pacific." Rich dirt pooled in the lowlands, bringing abundance to the hunter-forager tribes of the Kalapuyans and later to 19th-century homesteaders, who arrived on the Oregon Trail. Though bold enough to move cross-continent, they spurned the get-rich-quick gamble of the gold rush for this breadbasket. Life wasn't easy, but it could be good. They dug fields and orchards in the 30-mile-wide valley of Willamette, and tucked houses into the stonier hillsides.

Yet the slopes sent a different signal to winemakers with



their blend of new, fertile dirt and eroded basalt (very old and oxidized). Add warm days, cool nights and lots of rain, and the recipe was right to baby one of the world's fussiest grapes. "You don't tend to start with pinot noir. It's sort of the Everest of wine-making since it requires a very specific climate," Michael says.

But a handful of families did just that in the 1970s, including Bill Blosser and Susan Sokol Blosser, two liberal arts graduates from Stanford who loved wine, but didn't know much about it. She recalls, "We had no business or agricultural training, and we chose a grape that had never been grown in the U.S. It's a miracle we're still here."

Cultivating a Winery, an Industry & a Life

Fearless, the young couple planted their new vineyard and began raising a family in a drafty house across from a reeking turkey farm. City girl Susan's previous gardening experience had only been a sweet potato propped on toothpicks for a grade-school project. But the former Milwaukee debutante took to the land in a big way. "Soon she was driving tractors and scaring

away greedy birds with a shotgun, with her third child — a daughter — in tow. "Something happened to me when I got out into the vineyard," she explains. "It both freed my spirit and tied me to the land."

Soon Sokol Blosser began bottling its own vintages and trounced France during blind taste tests at the International Wine Center. Bill quit his day job to oversee the winery full-time, while Susan took charge of the fields. By 1991, she was president of the winery.

As her business skills blossomed, so did her concern for the land she loved. "I felt the interdependence of all living things, the perilous consequences of chemical agriculture, and how doomed we will be if we don't start repairing what we have done to the earth," she wrote in her memoir, *At Home In The Vineyard*.

The winery earned its organic certification in 2005, and now is battling toward "sustainable" status, under the leadership of Susan and Bill's children. Every step undergoes scrutiny. Renewable power. Biodiesel tractors. Unbleached recycled-paper cases. The underground barrel cellar — its earth roof tangled with

wildflowers in spring — even won LEED Certification: a first among American wineries and agricultural buildings.

This "good to the earth" policy extends beyond the cultivated fields too. Sokol Blosser restores and protects creek habitat, and was the first winery celebrated as "Salmon Safe." More than a dozen birdhouses dot the property: part of the Prescott Bluebird Recovery Project. Susan and her second husband, the estate's former winemaker, Russ Rosner, walk among them every morning and evening of hatchling season, feeding the chicks mealworms. "We have fledged over 250 bluebirds," she says. "We love having them in the vineyard — they're voracious insect eaters. They snap up bugs in mid-air."

"We're a far cry from being sustainable, but we do what we can. It's a journey... And if the journey is made with heart as well as the head, with as much respect for the planet as for profit, so much the better."

Willamette 411

The Allison Inn & Spa More than 500 pieces of original art grace this luxury resort, which routinely lands on lists of the world's best hotels and has won LEED Gold certification. Rooms run \$350-1,200. www.theallison.com

Equestrian Wine Tours World-champion rider Jake Price guides visitors through the red hills of Dundee. Wine-tasting tours start at \$120 for two hours. www.equestrianwinetours.com

Hotel Oregon This 1905 building — on historic McMinnville's main street — teems with quirky murals and offers a 360-degree view from its cozy rooftop bar. Its mid-May UFO festival attracts believers and skeptics alike. "Euro-style" (shared bath) queen rooms begin at \$60, while king suites with private bathrooms top out at \$145. www.mcmenamins.com/HotelOregon

The Joel Palmer House Truffles and wild mushrooms star at this elegant restaurant, run by a fourth-generation chef in a stately pioneer home. Tasting menus start at \$49. www.joelpalmerhouse.com

Nick's Italian Café Long a wine-maker hangout, Nick's beautifully blends pinot noirs with northern-Italian cuisine. The James Beard Awards just recognized the restaurant as an America's Classic for its timeless appeal and quality food. Pizzas start at \$14 and most mains run under \$30. www.nicksitaliancafe.com

Sokol Blosser Winery Lounge on the cedar deck, soaking in sunshine and vineyard views over a \$20 wine flight and \$20 butcher's board of charcuterie, cheese, nuts and olives. Or explore the interior spaces of this award-winning building, from the kitchen to the cherry-red-walled library (open daily, 10am-4pm). Wine enthusiasts should hop on an ATV tour of the property for \$50, or take a guided 4.5-hour hike on August 16 or September 6 (\$75, reserve ahead). www.sokolblosser.com

Thistle This lovely, locavore spot even won over *The New York Times*, which announced that it's "perfecting the new provincialism." Savor small plates running from \$8-30. www.thistlerestaurant.com

Willamette Shakespeare August brings The Bard to wineries throughout the region. The sixth season showcases *Twelfth Night* in collaboration with Portland's Northwest Classical Theatre Company. Admission is free, though donations are welcome! www.willametteshakespeare.org



Paying It Forward

Oregon pinot-pioneer Susan Sokol Blosser turned over the winery to her children in 2008. "As hard as it was to let go, I had to. I didn't want them to get Prince Charles syndrome," she laughs. She started a non-profit — The Yamhill Enrichment Society (YES) — to strengthen the local economy and tell the world what makes the area an amazing culinary destination. "Uniquely, we have celebrated chefs, world famous wines and small, diversified family farms — and now, lots of artists, too," Susan says. The group runs an early September harvest dinner, as well as historic home tours and community events, such as children's concerts.

www.yamhillenrichmentsociety.org

Above: A lazy summer evening on The Hotel Oregon's rooftop bar. Opposite page clockwise from top left: Founder Susan Sokol Blosser and her second husband, the estate's former winemaker Russ Rosner, live in this farmhouse at the vineyard's edge. A tractor tills the deep Jory soil that encourages fussy grapes so well. The new tasting room opened in summer 2013. A swirl of pinot noir.