

The Gorge  
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Portland, Oregon charms many who pine for the chance to play, dine, and drink in a creative, avant-garde wonderland. Those who arrive with wine on their minds typically head southwest to the heart of the Willamette Valley, home to memorable, nuanced pinot noir and mineral-edged chardonnay. While days of delicious tours abound in the Willamette Valley, a relatively new AVA fifty-five miles east has begun seducing more wine travelers—the Columbia Gorge.

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I pull through a narrow gap between a farmstead and a detached garage on the gravel drive up to AniChe Cellars. As I crawl out of my car, camera over my shoulder, Rachael strolls from behind the cellar to meet me. Past the chicken and turkey coop, through the pine trees, and down the steep, gravel embankment, she casually greets me with an outstretched hand. Rachael radiates authenticity, and so does the winery and property she orchestrates as Founder and Winemaker. Pretense cannot be found here. A few minutes later, Anaïs comes down the trail to join the conversation. The daughter of Rachael, Anaïs serves as Winemaker and General Manager, and lives behind the winery in a custom home. As we huddle around the tasting bar in a dusty, maroon yurt (temporary during harvest and crush), the mother-daughter duo playfully banter as they share their history and the forces that drive them. Rachael had long worked in fine dining establishments, including the local Columbia Gorge Hotel. One evening a customer noticed Rachael's exquisite pairing of rabbit with marsanne, as well as her radiating passion and pride. The customer stated, "You should *make* wine." And thus it began.

AniChe Cellars strives to craft wines that marry with food. "Wine belongs in the world of the culinary arts. I want wines to ride high on the palate," states Rachael confidently. With Walla Walla and Red Mountain only hours away, the region doesn't need more broad-shouldered behemoths. Rachael and Ani strive for lift, buoyancy, and moderate alcohol. They achieve their style by picking fruit based on phenolics and acid. Brix levels playing a less-dominant role in their harvest decisions. They also follow the old-world tradition of blending varietals. "Blends are the answer to balance." Their red wines demonstrate this passion. In true New World style, they audaciously make Bordeaux, Rhone, *and* Piedmont styled blends—no need to limit their ambitions. Thematically, you notice a smooth, round entrance throughout their

lineup with tannins singing background for the band. The carefully tended fermentation—slow and low temperature—helps create this style in conjunction with a “free-run juice only” policy. The sum? Captivating. This is why they successfully sell most of their 4200 cases direct-to-consumer every year. They hope to make that 100% soon. “And we will never go above 5000 cases. We know our end game. We want to create a legacy winery that maintains quality.” I recommend you taste this legacy in the making yourself.

While curving down Underwood Mountain, driving the thirteen miles east to Syncline Cellars, stunning ecological diversity graces my eyes. Mount Hood emerges above Hood River in the foreground. The Columbia Gorge AVA straddles the Columbia River, and thus resides in both Oregon and Washington. From west to east, temperatures vary drastically as the climate transitions from mountain rain forest on the west to sagebrush desert east. During the growing season you can commonly find a ten-degree temperature variation in the forty-mile span. Annual precipitation declines one inch every mile you travel east. Elevation also factors significantly. Some vineyards in the White Salmon and Hood River valleys sit as high as 1800 feet. This all leads to a viticultural mosaic ripe for exploration and varietal diversity. You will find pinot noir and gewürztraminer as well as zinfandel and merlot. While this array can peak consumer’s curiosity, quality ultimately does the seducing. Thankfully, the Gorge crafts gobs of brilliant wine.

My next stop, Syncline Cellars, has garnered the attention of east and west coast palates alike, the New York Times and the Big Publication editors. Despite this acclaim, you will find a modest, inviting facility and reasonable bottle prices when you arrive (almost universally true throughout the Columbia Gorge). James Mantone, founder and winemaker, focuses his energy on Rhone varietals, though he keeps his scope open to other varietals including gruner veltliner and pinot noir. Syncline consistently stuns me for the smack of focused fruit and impeccable balance found in all their wines. James uses concrete and neutral oak exclusively, allowing the fruit to speak purely. Favorites include the flagship Subduction Red, a blend of syrah, mourvedre, carignan, counoise, grenache, and cinsault. Floral aromas mingle with juicy, red fruits including cherry and watermelon—a smooth drink that will intrigue and please crowds. Also, seek out the Rhone single varietal bottlings of counoise, mourvedre, and cinsault. They are a rare treat, and allow the curious to explore individual Rhone varietals and their unique contribution to the famous blends of the Rhone Valley. Syncline’s Cuvéé Elena rises high as the winery’s premier GSM blend. You may have to twist an arm to taste or purchase this beauty, typically reserved for members.

If spending only one day in the Columbia Gorge, I recommend rounding out your excursion at Analemma Wines, across the Columbia River near Mosier, Oregon.

The impressive global resume of Steven Thompson and Kris Fade ultimately landed them in the Columbia Gorge where they focus on brilliant gewürztraminer and alpine pinot noir. A new vineyard under their management will lead to the addition of other varietals, but they could stop at gewürztraminer and pinot noir for all I care. A horizontal tasting of their two gewürztraminers poignantly expressed the two distinct vineyard sites. Both provide chilling, vibrant acidity, and waves of lovely aromatics that include pit fruits, lemon, and floral overtones. Analemma is relatively new on the scene, but the unique terroir of their vineyards, in conjunction with their prior experience, leaves them well situated to make waves.

While in the Columbia Gorge, start your day with breakfast at Egg River Café in Hood River and close at the historic Columbia Gorge Hotel for dinner and rest. A lovely spa awaits if you desire. The Gorge lures outdoor adventure enthusiasts from around the world, especially mountain bikers, wind and kite surfers, and hikers. Outfitters and guides are numerous. A half-day venture to Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood, painstakingly built by the CCC, will surely impress your architectural curiosity as well as your taste buds thanks to Chef Jason Stoller Smith.

The Columbia Gorge deserves your attention. A lesser-known gem adorning the hem of the Rose City, it is too often overshadowed by the sparkling diamonds in the Willamette Valley. Thanks to recent press from significant national publications, the Gorge will attract more wine travelers in upcoming years. Ride in on the front edge of this wave—it makes for a memorable trip.