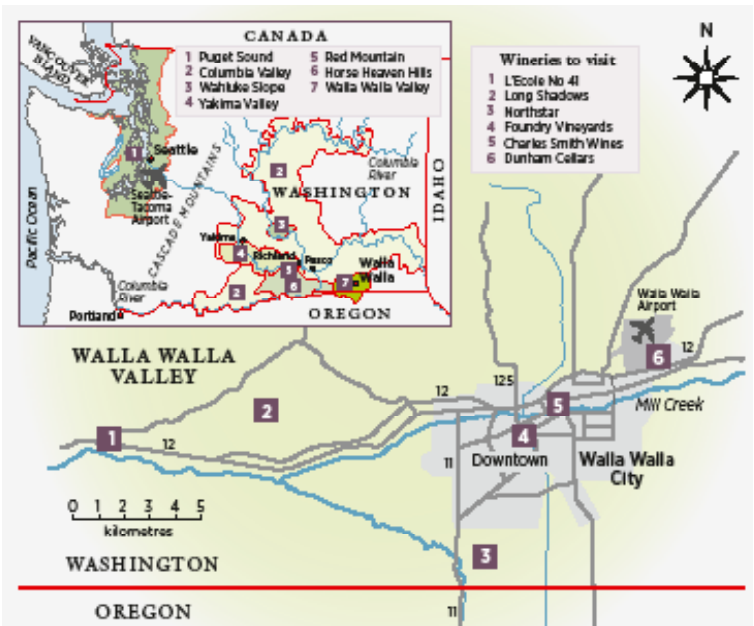




Above: in addition to its thriving tourist industry and wine industry, Walla Walla is a region lush with wheat fields – irrigated by distinctive wheel-line sprinkler systems



Six of the best wineries to visit

- ★ **L'Ecole No 41**  
Located next to Woodward Canyon, these two make for a fine half-day tasting, with veteran winemakers and access to estate-grown grapes from vineyards more than 30 years old. [www.lecole.com](http://www.lecole.com)
- ★ **Long Shadows**  
A venture conceived by wine industry veteran Allen Shoup, and managed by French winemaker Gilles Nicault. Each wine is the project of a different visiting winemaker, including Randy Dunn, John Duval and Armin Diel. Booking required. [www.longshadows.com](http://www.longshadows.com)
- ★ **Northstar**  
Part of the expansive Ste Michelle Wine Estates group, most wines are sourced from Walla Walla vineyards, and many made in limited quantities. It's set on a hilltop with a commanding view of the vineyards. The Walla Walla Merlot is still best. [www.northstarwinery.com](http://www.northstarwinery.com)
- ★ **Foundry Vineyards**  
A regional institution, attracting sculptors from around the world. The tasting room features much of this, alongside limited releases, many from owner Mark Anderson's vineyard. [www.foundryvineyards.com](http://www.foundryvineyards.com)
- ★ **Charles Smith Wines**  
Smith is the impresario of a number of wineries. K Vintners, on the grounds of a century-old farmstead, specialises in Syrah. The Charles Smith wines include the most and least expensive offerings, and the tasting room often hosts rock 'n' roll parties. [www.kvintners.com](http://www.kvintners.com)
- ★ **Dunham Cellars**  
A broad line-up, from Riesling to single-vineyard Syrahs. The tasting room is hung with massive oil paintings by Eric Dunham, many of which adorn the labels of his reserve wines. The winery offers two sites for caravans. By reservation. [www.dunhamcellars.com](http://www.dunhamcellars.com)



The *Decanter* travel guide to

Washington State

FACT FILE

**Walla Walla AVA** 130,630ha (31% in Oregon, 69% in Washington)  
**Total plantings** 647ha: Cabernet Sauvignon 41%, Merlot 26%, Syrah 16%, Cabernet Franc 4%, Sangiovese 2%, Chardonnay 2%, Viognier 1%, other reds 7%, other whites 1%  
**Elevation** 120m to 600m

The Walla Walla AVA in the eastern part of this state offers superb festivals, dining and touring options, says Paul Gregutt

WASHINGTON STATE WINE country can seem like the end of the earth – even for those of us who live here. Eastern Washington, where most wine grapes are grown, is principally a barren desert. Blistering hot and bone dry in the summer, with bone-chilling cold in the winter, to the unwary it can seem uninviting at best. But there is a landscape of spectacular beauty if you know where to look, and

for value, variety, amenities, quality and convenience, wine touring in Washington offers an experience that can equal, and often surpass, what you will find anywhere else in the country. Though Washington is often seen as a relative newcomer to fine wine production, commercially made wines date back to the late 1960s. Today the state is home to more than 700 wineries and is the number two wine producer in the country. A long way behind California, of course, except where it counts – in quality and value. Those who want to experience Washington wines first-hand will find many surprises. Despite its reputation for endless rain, western Washington has dry summers, with moderate temperatures. There are dozens of wineries within a short drive

from the Seattle-Tacoma airport. But what you will not find here are vineyards. Yes, there are a few hectares scattered on the various islands of Puget Sound, and a few more up in Woodinville, but for all intents and purposes, Washington wine grapes are grown in the eastern half of the state. The Cascade mountain range, which runs from the Canadian border south and on into Oregon, divides Washington into a wet (west) side and dry (east) side. The dry side is where the vineyards are. It's mostly desert, quite hot in the summer and reliably sunny. It's also vast. The (almost) all-encompassing Columbia Valley AVA contains nigh on 4.5 million hectares, and the many sub-AVAs are scattered throughout this vast region. Walla Walla wonders If time is a constraint, make Walla Walla your main destination. It's an easy 50-minute flight from Seattle and plops you into the heart of a region lush with vineyards, wheat fields, row crops, rolling hills and a thriving tourist industry. Within the Walla Walla AVA are 120 producing wineries and more than 100 tasting rooms, many set amid well-tended

vineyards. The officially designated wine region spills over the state line into Oregon, bordered to the east and south by the Blue Mountains. Vineyards on both sides offer diverse soils and have proven very successful with Rhône and Bordeaux grapes. The city of Walla Walla was one of the first to be founded in Washington State. Settlers heading west in covered wagons began to arrive in the mid-1800s, and many stayed for the moderate climate and rich, productive soils. The town is ringed by the snow-capped Blue Mountains, verdant vineyards and thousands of unbroken acres of rolling, wheat- ➤

**How to get there**  
**By plane to** Seattle, then take a connecting flight to Walla Walla.  
**By car from** Seattle to Walla Walla – the five-hour drive includes a moderately steep mountain pass that can be snowbound from November to March.





**Above: the Celebrate Walla Walla wine festival will focus in 2013 on Cabernet Sauvignon. Top: the Marcus Whitman hotel is a landmark in downtown Walla Walla**

covered hills, known as the Palouse. Superb dining and year-round recreational and cultural activities make it worth visiting for a full week if you have the time. The town celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2012, and was recently designated the Friendliest Small Town in America. Walla Walla's Main Street is packed with century-old brick buildings that are home to numerous well-appointed tasting rooms, restaurants, boutiques and galleries.

Among the best-known wineries are Abeja, Cayuse, Canoe Ridge, Dunham Cellars, K Vintners, L'Ecole No 41, Leonetti Cellar, Northstar, Pepper Bridge, Walla Walla Vintners and Woodward Canyon. In the past decade they've been joined by more than 100 boutiques, so wine-tasting opportunities abound. The best times to visit, not surprisingly, are the spring months of May and June, and the harvest season, which extends from early September through late October. At these times temperatures are moderate, the skies are clear, the wineries are humming with activity and the locally grown produce, organically farmed meats, farmhouse cheeses and other local products are widely available.

*‘Walla Walla celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2012, and was recently designated the Friendliest Small Town in America’*

### Wine weekends

There are a few weekends each year during which virtually all wineries open to visitors. Spring Release Weekend (3–5 May in 2013) is when they will pour the new white wines from the previous autumn's harvest, and reds from the two previous vintages. Library selections are often available too, and many wineries offer food and live music. Be forewarned – the limited lodging and dining options mean that reservations are essential.

Following close on the heels of Spring Release is a key non-wine event for the region – the Balloon Stampede Weekend (May 10–12), during which dozens of hot-air balloons cloister at the Walla Walla Fairgrounds. Soon after there is the re-christened Celebrate Walla Walla event, scheduled for 20–22 June. This year the varietal focus will be on Cabernet Sauvignon, with tastings and seminars featuring more than 70 Walla Walla Valley winemakers, and regional wine critics.

The second major wine tasting weekend is Fall Release, on 1–3 November. Though it falls just outside the optimal weather window, it can often be surprisingly mild. Harvest is wrapping up, wineries are soaked in the scent of newly fermenting grapes, and the buzz of the grape crush energises everyone. Autumn colours are still in evidence, the air is crisp and clean, and there are rich autumnal menus at all the local restaurants, perfect for the ripe red wines being debuted. This is the most under-rated and often most delightful time to visit, as it's busy but not overcrowded, never too hot, and rarely very cold. **D**

*Paul Gregutt is a US-based wine writer and columnist specialising in Washington and Oregon and has written Washington wines & wineries: the essential guide (2007)*

*Look out for our tasting of Washington reds in next month's May issue*



*‘At the Balloon Stampede Weekend, dozens of hot-air balloons cloister at the Walla Walla Fairgrounds’*

**Below: stay at Abeja, set on a century-old farmstead and you can taste in the estate's winery, not usually open to the public**



## Walla Walla

WHERE TO STAY, EAT, SHOP AND RELAX  
Unique B&Bs, welcoming eateries and food-friendly shops abound

### HOTELS

#### Abeja

This converted farmhouse is hard to book but it's worth it. Along with comfy rooms in a converted barn, bunkhouse and chicken coop, there is the Abeja winery, not open to the general public, but welcoming B&B guests. **[www.abeya.net](http://www.abeya.net)**

#### The Fat Duck Inn



Home comforts are the rule in this cosy, Craftsman-style B&B. A speciality is the farm-to-table gourmet dinner offered in the private dining room or garden patio. **[www.fatduckinn.com](http://www.fatduckinn.com)**

#### The Marcus Whitman

This landmark hotel in the heart of Walla Walla includes a cosy bar, an award-winning restaurant, and a spacious, welcoming lobby. **[www.marcuswhitmanhotel.com](http://www.marcuswhitmanhotel.com)**

#### Vine & Roses

This classic, Victorian-era B&B, well appointed with museum-

quality antiques, is a few blocks from downtown. The owners also operate a winery, Sinclair Wine Estates. **[www.vineandroses.com](http://www.vineandroses.com)**

### BARS & RESTAURANTS

#### Brasserie Four

This French bistro has *frites* to die for, along with staples such as *croque-monsieur* and home-made paté. The wine list is excellent. **+1 509 529 2011**

#### Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen

The project of Chris and Island Ainsworth, this is the centre of culinary excellence in Walla Walla. A tight but well-chosen wine list complements the changing, Mediterranean menu. Expect to see locals and winemakers. **<http://saffronmediterraneankitchen.com>**

#### The Maple Counter Cafe

This bustling, friendly cafe has an ample menu of comfort food – farmhouse breakfasts and lunches. **[www.maplecountercafe.com](http://www.maplecountercafe.com)**

#### Whitehouse Crawford

This white tablecloth enterprise is located in a renovated, 1904-vintage planing mill. The menu focuses on locally sourced beef, poultry and produce. **<http://whitehousecrawford.com>**

### SHOPS

#### Cugini's



A well-stocked Italian deli, with a fine assortment of cheeses and cured meats, along with complete heat-and-eat dinners. **[www.cuginiimportfoods.com](http://www.cuginiimportfoods.com)**

#### Salumiere Cesario



The region's premier cheesemonger, with a fine selection of cured meats, artisanal beer and wine, handmade truffles, salts and spices, olive oils as well as fresh bread and pasta. **[www.salumierecesario.com](http://www.salumierecesario.com)**

#### Wild Walla Walla Wine Woman

In a town bursting with tasting rooms, this remains the only independent wine shop. Owner Catie McIntyre Walker carries a fine selection of Washington wines, along with well-chosen bottles from around the world. **[www.wallawallawinewoman.com](http://www.wallawallawinewoman.com)**

### ACTIVITIES

#### Gesa Power House Theatre

Recently remodelled and opened as the home to a summer Shakespeare festival, this former utility station brings a mix of live performance events throughout the year. **[www.phtww.com](http://www.phtww.com)**

#### Monteillet Fromagerie

About half hour's drive from Walla Walla, this fromagerie produces sheep and goat cheeses, offered for sale in the small tasting room. The owners also run a farmhouse gîte. **[www.monteilletcheese.com](http://www.monteilletcheese.com)**

#### Walla Walla Farmers Market

Open on weekends from May to October, the open-air market is packed with fresh produce, baked goods, meats, flowers, cheeses and crafts. Food trucks and live music add to the lively atmosphere. **Corner of N 4th Ave and Main St**