

Domaine dames: the women-run wineries of Seattle

On a tour of the vineyards of Washington and Oregon, Tam Leach finds female vintners are adding fizz to their profits

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We're driving a pinot-red convertible, and we may be close to the limit. Sara and I are road-tripping from one winery to the next. It's Thelma and Louise meets Sideways, except that neither of us is about to have a meltdown and we're in the Pacific Northwest, not California. And the only women that we're interested in are those taking over the cellars.

It all started in Seattle. In the Kimpton Hotel's Vintage Park, to be precise. The plan was to indulge in a bit of pampering and relax before hitting the road and the bottle. Each of the boutique hotels under the Kimpton umbrella has its own "story": a theme to keep the hotel unique. The Vintage Park story is wine. Each room showcases artwork from one of Washington's 400-plus wineries and each featured winery gets to host one of the nightly wine receptions.

Barely unpacked, I join head concierge Kelly Koon, the hotel's enthusiastic "Vine Vixen", in the lobby. Tonight's guest vintner is Jeff Gordon, from Gordon Brothers Winery in Washington's Columbia Valley. Guests float in and out of the lobby, goblets of his chardonnay and merlot in hand.

"So what are we looking for?" asks a young guy in shorts and flip-flops. A silver-haired couple on a road trip from Arizona enquire about vintages. To each question Jeff responds enthusiastically. Reds start out purple and age to a brick colour. Most grapes are grown in eastern Washington, where the climate is dry. Washington comes second only to California in US wine production. Not once is a question fobbed off with an arched eyebrow or withering reply. This is to be standard in the days ahead: a general joy in learning and teaching, from tasting basics to technical winemaking nuances. Which is great for me, because I know next to nothing about wine.

I collect my friend Sara, along with the convertible, the next day. Our grand plan is to head across Puget Sound to Washington's Olympic Peninsula, where a couple of women-run wineries are making news. It's not that we have anything against wines made by men, but it's interesting, this new guard, and the peninsula itself is a peaceful spot for a weekend break.

Or would be, if we weren't stuck in traffic. The journey can take as little as two hours, but we make the wrong choice and drive around instead of queuing for the ferry. Six hours later, we're pulling into our B&B in Sequim. A large glass of local pinot gris later and we're ready for bed. Each of the four rooms at the Red Caboose is an inventively converted railroad wagon, with breakfast served in a silver 1937 dining car. Out of the wrap-around windows I can see the

silhouette of the Olympic range, whose rain-shadow keeps this sleepy hamlet the sunniest place in the state.

We're on the beach early as the mist rolls over the rocky islets and kayakers of Freshwater Bay. Sara Gagnon co-owns two businesses on the peninsula: Adventures Through Kayaking, and Harbinger Winery. She opens up the tasting room each day after a swift paddle with sea otters and cormorants. By 11am, business is waiting back in the converted logging shed; a trio from the mainland who remember her from her days at neighbouring Olympic Cellars. Like many Americans, Gagnon wasn't introduced to wine until she was in her twenties; intrigued by the industry, she apprenticed herself to the then vintner at Olympic Cellars, and took over six months later.

She pours us all a pre-lunch cabernet franc as she answers her customers' queries. We raise glasses, then slip away to nose around the vintage clutter shops in Port Angeles, and wander along crab central, foggy Dungeness Spit. That evening, strains of folksy Americana drift across the patio at Olympic Cellars. During the high season, every weekend the place is packed for the Summer Music Series, part of the winery's busy events calendar.

Until Gagnon set out on her own in 2004, Olympic Cellars was entirely women-owned and operated; there is now a young Frenchman on the four-strong team. Having introduced the Working Girl Wines series, designed "for sharing with co-workers after a long day in pantyhose and pumps", sales have gone from 1,000 to 3,200 cases a year, and growing. Last year the winery started the Working Girl Road Trips programme: present a receipt for accommodation on the peninsula, receive a goodie bag including a wine glass and discount vouchers to local shops, services and attractions. On a cork board are thank-you notes and group shots of happy-looking road-tripping women, wine in hand. "The Broads", "The 3 Amigos", "These teachers needed to get away".

Miraculously, Sara and I make it back to the Red Caboose in one piece, and wake up the next morning hangover-free. It must be a combination of the four-course breakfasts and blustery sea air. We wander through sun-kissed lavender farms and visit the pretty Victorian seaport of Port Townsend.

On to Portland, the convertible ditched for the stellar views of Amtrak's Cascades, the express train that rolls south through spectacular countryside. On the crest of a renaissance from industrial slump to sensitively hip capital of America, green-conscious Portland loves everything home-grown: farmers' markets, microbrews and Oregon's 300 or so wineries. Just 20 miles from the city is the esteemed pinot noir region of the Willamette Valley. Our principal destination is Domaine Drouhin, perched high in the rolling hills. The winemaker here is Véronique Drouhin, daughter of the French Burgandy Drouhin clan. Her father bought the land in 1986, but it was thought that the formal monsieur might intimidate in laid-back Oregon. Unassuming Véronique stepped up to the task. Lunch is at a bistro owned by the Ponzi family, where yet another daughter, Luisa Ponzi, has taken over the family business.

Back in the city, we stop in at a slightly bizarre new music, new wine showcase in a darkened rock bar before heading on to the finale of our trip, the fifth anniversary of Hip Chicks Do Wine.

I cringe at the name but it's caught my curiosity, which winemakers Laurie Lewis and Renee Neely say is precisely the point. "We wanted to make wine fun," say the duo. They can't talk for long, weaving between barrels and a local band to fetch more bottles for eager tasters. And no, the name and the pink logos, the Vin Nombriil (Belly Button Wine) and Riot Girl Rose don't seem to faze the guys. There are plenty here tonight; half of the members of the Hip Chicks wine club are men.

WASHINGTON: GETTING THERE

British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies the only non-stops from the UK to Seattle, daily from Heathrow. The author flew with United (0845 8444 777; www.unitedairlines.co.uk) via San Francisco.

GETTING AROUND

Amtrak (001 800 872 7245; www.amtrak.com) round-trip fares between Seattle and Portland start at \$56 (£31).

STAYING THERE

Hotel Vintage Park, 1100 Fifth Avenue, Seattle (001 206 624 8000; www.hotelvintagepark.com). The Gals Just Want To Have Wine weekend packages start at \$230 (£128) for two.

Red Caboose Getaway, 24 Old Coyote Way, Sequim (001 360 683 7350; www.redcaboosegetaway.com). Caboozes start at \$100 (£56).

Olympic National Park campsites, Olympic Peninsula (001 360 565 3100; www.nps.gov/olym). Campgrounds from \$10 (£5.60).

The Westin, 750 SW Alder Street, Portland (001 503 294 9000; www.westin.com). Doubles from \$149 (£83), incl breakfast.

WINERIES

Harbinger Winery, 2358 Highway 101 W, Port Angeles (001 360 452 4262; www.harbingerwinery.com).

Olympic Cellars, 255410 Highway 101 E, Sequim (001 360 452 0160; www.olympiccellars.com).

Domaine Drouhin, 6750 Breyman Orchards Road, Dayton (001 503 864 2700; www.domainedrouhin.com).

Hip Chicks Do Wine, 4510 SE 23rd Avenue, Portland (001 503 234 3790; www.hipchicksdowine.com).

MORE INFORMATION

Washington State Tourism (001 800 544 1800; www.experiencewashington.com).

Portland Oregon Visitors Association (001 503 275 8355; www.travelportland.com).