

BRITISH AIRWAYS

high life

TRAVEL EXPERIENCES FROM THE EXPERTS

Grape escapes

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Move over Merlot, it's time for Grillo and Zibibbo. As wine lovers look further afield for their tippie, Fiona Sims uncorks aristocratic whites and juicy young reds in four new regions



Canoe Ridge Vineyard, Washington

Photography by R & K Muschenetz/Cephas

Walla Walla, Washington, USA

Washington State knows all about boutique wines. Not much of it got exported outside the US – not because they didn't like it, but because there wasn't enough of the good stuff to go around. That's changing, though. Plantings have shot up in recent years, and now Washington is the second largest wine-producing region in the US after California.

You can thank the continental climate. Rainless summers and autumns lessen the risk of disease, while hot days and cold nights encourage bright fruit flavours and great colour. At the last count, there were more than 550 wineries in Washington State, with over 30,000 acres of vineyards, planted with more than 20 varieties of grapes. The top ones include Chardonnay and Merlot, with riesling following close on its heels, and Cabernet Sauvignon the fourth most planted variety. But Sauvignon, Syrah and Semillon are also turning heads, while Cabernet Franc has its followers, and early-ripening varieties grown back west in the Puget Sound AVA (American Viticultural Area) around Seattle, such as Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris, are grabbing some of the attention. Many winemakers, though, believe Washington's future lies in its red wines.

Touring here feels very Wild West – right down to fragrant, wiry shrub sagebrush, which bounces across the endless rolling hills, big skies broken occasionally by glimpses of the snow-capped mounts of Hood and Adam.

The Abeja winery in Walla Walla, East Washington, makes a great base for exploring. Wineries to look out for include Hogue and K Vintners, Canoe Ridge and L'Ecole 41. The Inn at Abeja (abeja.net) offers seriously comfortable accommodation (rooms from £115) with the best breakfast for miles around (and decent wines).

Walla Walla is a fun little town, where winemakers mix with wheat farmers, cellar hands mix with students. The Creektown Café (+1 509 522 4777, creektowncafe.com) is the place to go – for winemakers, particularly. Other Walla Walla culinary hot spots include Saffron (+1 509 525 2112, saffronmediterraneankitchen.com) and 26 Brix (+1 509 526 4075, twentysixbrix.com).

The area is split up into different appellations (or AVAs) – the biggest of which is the Columbia Valley, where even varieties such as leMBERger are showing promise. But new areas are opening up all the time, which, of course, is what makes Washington State all the more exciting – for winemaker and wine tourist.

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