

# ROGUE RIVER VALLEY AVA



| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

On a recent road trip through Oregon, my husband Steve and I landed in Medford. Our goal during our four-day trip was to explore this booming and new-to-me wine region and, of course, taste the wines. During our trip, we visited seven fabulous wineries, Rogue Creamery, Lillie Belle Chocolates, and Rogue Grape, a wine shop.

Our wine sipping was unincumbered as one of two touring companies, Bravo Tours with Tracy, and Main Street Tours with Nathan, escorted us around each day. Not only did we learn about the area from both drivers, but we were able to enjoy the sipping experience. Our wine stops included Del Rio Vineyard Estate, Hummingbird Estate,

Kriselle Cellars, Bayer Family Estate, Padigan, Irvine & Roberts Vineyards, and Troon Vineyard. The Rogue Valley is known for its sunshine, theater and music, delicious food, and outdoor adventure. The region's three valleys offer varying cool to warm microclimates that support the growth of more than 70 varietals. Currently, the area boasts 100

wineries, 60 tasting rooms, and 6,000+ acres of vineyards. The Rogue River Valley AVA begins approximately 75 miles from the Oregon coast and 50 miles from Crater Lake; the Rogue River and its tributaries define the AVA. Established in 1991, the wine in this valley is finally recognized worldwide.



## DEL RIO VINEYARD ESTATE

Del Rio boasts one of the largest vineyards in Southern Oregon, growing mainly pinot noir, pinot gris, chardonnay, and syrah grapes. Steve and I began in the tasting room where we were handed a glass of 100% grenache rosé, and led out to the lawn, where a teepee, a short table, a gorgeous flower arrangement, and a delectable charcuterie platter awaited us. This lawn is a stunning spot overlooking the green vineyards in summer and the patchwork of color ranging from yellow to orange and to fiery red in the fall. The Sunday music series begins in May and ends in September, along with Friday night concerts.

Originally a pear orchard, thirteen grape varieties grow at Del Rio and Birdseye vineyards today. The owners of Del Rio aim to create wines with rich, ripe fruit and subtle nuances, expressing the beauty of their Southern Oregon terroir. Another vineyard planting is in the works near Table Rock.

Winemaker Jean-Michel Jussiaume is from the Loire Valley in France and has been at Del Rio for 15 years. He said, "It is fun to be a pioneer of sorts in this relatively new wine region." Jean-Michel produces mostly 100% varietal wines for the three labels at the winery: Del Rio Estate, Rock Point, and Joleci. Our tasting

included a light and crisp viognier, which sees a little acacia oak, a young 2021 Pinot Noir made solely from Pommard clone grapes, a library cabernet sauvignon with luscious dark fruit and a long oak finish, and finally, a full-bodied syrah. Each wine exhibited excellent acidity making it food friendly. ❖



## THE HUMMINGBIRD ESTATE

When we arrived at the 1926 historic grand estate, Meghann Walk, daughter of the owners, greeted us. Her family purchased the place in 2017 after it sat on the market for five years. With a history of farming, Meghann's parents were in search of a property with acreage. After visiting, they had grand ideas of revitalizing the estate and turning it into a bed and breakfast. After two years, they had ripped out the old pear trees, planted 2-year-old vines, and re-modeled the main house with five suites and a

two-bedroom cottage in the vineyard, The Inn at Hummingbird Estates.

The estate has 18 acres of vines planted with chardonnay, pinot noir, grenache, syrah, malbec, and mourvèdre. Chris Graves at Naumes Crush & Fermentation is the winemaker.

Visitors can choose from numerous bottled wines, canned wines, and several beers on tap, which rotate regularly. I sampled a mixed flight with a light 2020 viognier, a tasty Malbec, a 2018 cabernet sauvignon with lovely viscosity,

a very dry 2019 syrah, and a delicious 2020 late-harvest white dessert wine. Steve selected a flight of beers.

The Estate offers several seating options inside, but we chose to sit out on the terrace that, according to Meghann, offered the view that sold her father on the property. ❖



## KRISELLE CELLARS

Steve and I arrived at Kriselle Cellars on our second day of winetasting. Nora Lancaster, director and partner at the winery, greeted us at the door. Scott Steingraber and his wife Kris began turning their “hobby” into a business in 2003, Nora joined the partnership in 2011, and the winery opened in 2012. She said, “The building, constructed with huge timbers, was designed to resemble a grand Western lodge and was placed on a raised foundation with great intention so guests could look out over the vineyards and not through them. The building has abundant reclaimed materials, and within the last year, the winery’s hospitality and

production are all fueled with solar power.”

Nora said, “The first vintage was in 2009, and I sold the first bottle. By the time the tasting room opened, Kriselle wines were already well known, having won several double golds at competitions.” The terrace and vineyard are warm spots during the summer, and so not only are there firepits for when it is cold, but misters that help cool everyone off outside when it is hot.

The vineyard is uniquely planted. Later ripening varieties are at the top of the slope, and cooler ripening varieties are down by the irrigation pond, which means the blocks of

each varietal are not all lined up together.

We enjoyed our tasting with a delicious charcuterie plate. We tried seven wines at our tasting. Tempranillo is one of this area’s most decadent and favorite varietals, especially when paired with paella. Steve and I loved the 2018 Di’tani, a blend of several reds. The malbec provided a delicious smoked meat note, and we enjoyed the lively salinity of the Albariño. There were notes of white peach and a lovely plush mouth feel. It went fabulously with the dried apricots on our charcuterie plate. ❖



## BAYER FAMILY ESTATE

We met Sara Bayer at the Bayer Family Estate. Her parents bought the property in the 1990s and planted the first vines in the early 2000s. Her mom is Italian, and her grandparents own the property next door. When her mom was growing up, she visited every summer, and it was her dream to live in Southern Oregon. She wanted to grow Italian wines, and so Sara grew up going on R&D trips to Italy. Sara and her sister were professional equestrians growing up, but they eventually converted their equestrian horse facility into a functional winery. Sara, her sister, and their father own the winery. Most of the varietals on the property are Italian, which is unique to the valley.

This area has plenty of sunshine, and access to Rogue River water, allowing the family to grow Italian varietals that love the heat. They also produce chardonnays on the property that prefer moist, foggy weather. Although retired from the arena world, the sisters still ride and bring their six horses out for people to play with as part of the estate experience. The wines are delicious, and the property is beautiful, but the atmosphere is casual. The Bayer family wants their guests to relax and enjoy the property as much as they love it. The family is building a new tasting room from an 1800s historic farmhouse on the property.

Steve and I tasted a 2016 Dolcetto with aromas of blackberry, plum, and hints of toasted oak. Notes of dark cherry stood out in the 2017 Sangiovese, along with cracked black pepper. My favorite was the 2019 Rosé Primitivo Frizzante with apple blossom on the nose, hints of peach, nice minerality, and a surprising dryness. ❖



## PADIGAN

2 Hawk Vineyard & Winery is now Padigan—named after the soil. Owner Ross Allen and winemaker Kiley Evans gave us a winery, lab, and tasting room tour. The people at Padigan understand, believe in, and are committed to sustainability. Ross Allen says, “We give back what we remove, whether in the vineyard by returning grape compost to the soil or by using the region’s only winery-installed solar array for our state-of-the-art gravity-flow winery.

We strive to produce exceptional, sophisticated wines that speak of the soil, climate, and environment in which they thrive. Uniquely, unmistakably, Rogue Valley. Sustainability is not a buzzword or a hashtag. It is an ethos, a way of life, a part of my moral compass.”

Ross Allen is an agriculturalist. He is into everything about the terroir. He wants his wines to express a sense and taste of place. Southern Oregon affords a broader climate range than Napa Valley, Willamette Valley, and even Bordeaux, which is why so many varietals thrive in the various microclimates throughout the region. According to Kiley, “We don’t want just to make a great malbec that tastes and smells like malbec; we want to make a great malbec that tastes and smells like a great malbec from the Rogue Valley.”

The overwhelming thing I can say about Padigan wines is that they are lush and delicious. I discovered a wonderful creaminess in these wines. They aged the viognier in 100%

new French oak barrels, and the perfume was exquisite. The wine was lush with a nice weight, an excellent balance of acid, and a hint of residual fruit, and it finished with a velvety smoothness.

The Kiley blend comprised syrah, grenache, and viognier. There was a nice herbaceousness, and it was an easy-drinking wine. It went terrific with the roast beef on our charcuterie plate. The malbec and the Kiley blend were delicious and boasted a silky softness. We finished with an unreleased port, which was unfair because I love ports. What an excellent way to end a sophisticated, casual experience. ❖



## IRVINE & ROBERTS VINEYARDS

Doug and Dionne Irvine, two owners of the winery, met us in the tasting room. We had a fun and informative time dining on delicious cuisine and sipping sophisticated wines. The vineyard sits at around 2100 feet in the foothills at the convergence of the Cascade and Siskiyou Mountains. The cool temperatures at this elevation provide the perfect environment to produce elegant, cool-climate wines, predominantly chardonnay and pinot noir. The patio boasts fire pits to warm up next to when it is cold and lounge chairs to soak in the sunshine on hot days.

Doug said, “We received an education in growing grapes at this elevation and soon learned what grows best. Our first vintage was

in 2009, and we planted our first grapes in 2007.”

Our tasting began with a beautiful reserve chardonnay, Convergence, paired with an exquisite cheese board. The owners decided to provide the community with an elevated tasting menu to pair with their wine flights, so they hired Chef Charlie Hutchinson.

During our discussion, we talked about other wine regions around the world. Dionne shared how winemakers in other AVAs had the same mindset. She said, “What is going on in Walla Walla is a great comparison to what is happening here in the Rogue Valley. We are embracing what works well in the area and telling you why. Brian our winemaker, is striving to make

the best wines possible from this site, and I would say that more winery owners in the area are honing in on what grows best at their sites and are raising the bar for the area’s wines.” Before leaving, we enjoyed a delicious rosé with a vegetable-topped puff pastry and then sipped on a decadent glass of pinot noir. ❖



## TROON VINEYARD

Our last stop on this trip through the Rogue River Valley AVA was at Troon Vineyard. We met Craig Camp, the general manager, outside the tasting room and then left for a tour of the farm with Garrett Long, director of Agriculture. Garrett was a wealth of information and explained in plain language the philosophy and the procedures required for biodynamic farming. Troon Vineyards is a Demeter Biodynamic® Certified and Regenerative Organic Gold Certified™ farm. Garrett said, “Due to the diversified soils available to us here, we are growing 20 varieties of grapes, many of which are native to the Rhone Valley in France, both Northern Rhone and Southern Rhone, and then just a couple that are from Southwestern France. The big picture is that here in the Applegate Valley, we have a Mediterranean climate with fertile granite soils and a couple of other different soil types on the farm.

The property boasts several different gardens, and there are over 90 species of native plants located throughout the property. The garden just outside of the tasting room serves as a reservoir for seeds and plant material that we use to help maximize the biodiversity on the farm. Part of the Biodynamic certification requires that at least 10% of the farm is dedicated to wildlife habitats.

Troon wines are all from estate-grown grapes. Garrett said, “All 50 acres of clean, certified rootstock grapes have been planted in the last five years, 10 acres at a time. Sheep and chickens keep down the weeds and fertilize the soil. We plant cover crops each year and till them into the soil as green manure. This procedure will continue for the first three years after planting the vines; then, we will stop and not disturb the soil any longer.” Various plants and wildlife housing are situated within the farm to

encourage wildlife. We recognize the animals and birds as having a value in the ecosystem, both for our agricultural goals and to build their populations in the area.

The biodynamic philosophy continues in the cellar. Winemaker Nate Wall is a minimalist and only uses native yeasts with no additives. Traditional oak barrels were traded in for cement and ceramic containers for aging the wines. Steve and I enjoyed a quick tour of the facility and then went in to try the wines.

I was unfamiliar with a few varietals. We enjoyed the Amphora Rolle made from vermentino grapes, and the Kubli Bench Amber, a blend of vermentino, riesling, and roussanne grapes. Moving into the reds, we sipped on the Côtes Du Kubli Red, a blend of syrah and grenache. The wines were tasty and light and left a cleanliness on the palate. ❖