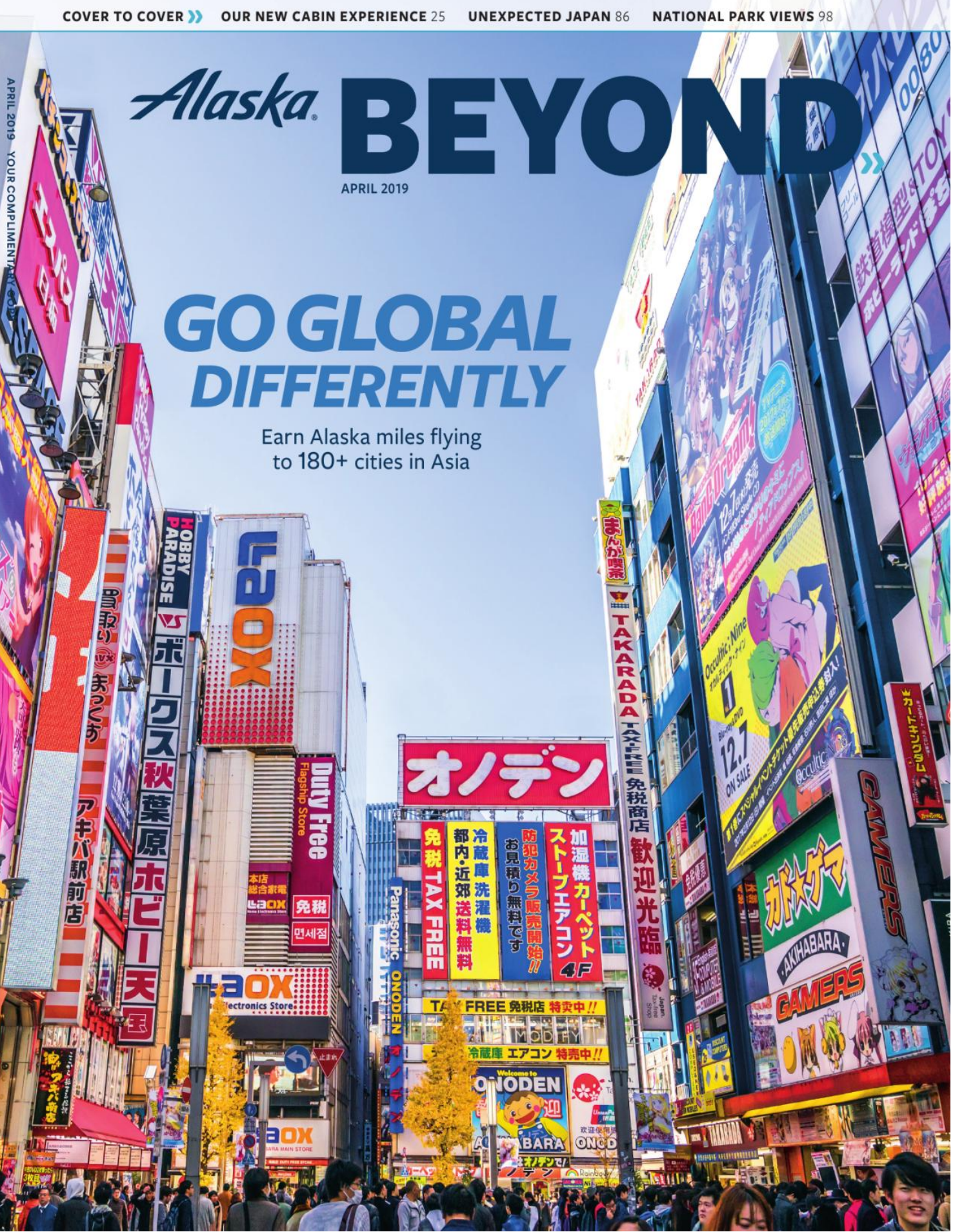


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NORTHERN OREGON WINE COUNTRY TOURS

Excursions in the Oregon towns of McMinnville, Carlton and Dundee

By Alex Pulaski

» During a winemaker dinner at the exquisite Allison Inn & Spa in Newberg, Oregon, my wife, Mica, and I clink glasses with other diners to celebrate the region's burgeoning wine industry.

Next to me, wine writer Karen MacNeil remarks that she considers the Willamette Valley to be "one of the most exciting wine areas in the United States."

"Oregon has worked so hard since the 1970s to make their wines compelling and undeniable on the world stage," says the best-selling author of *The Wine Bible*.

I share MacNeil's enthusiasm, especially for the Willamette Valley Wine Country, which boasts more than 500 wineries and runs from just south of Portland to south of Eugene.

Few parts of this region are evolving faster than the northern Willamette Valley, an area anchored by McMinnville and the smaller towns of Carlton and Dundee. These three towns—located between 30 and 40 miles southwest of Portland—draw my wife and me back again and again for weekend trips to enjoy

the views, meals and accommodations that are equal to the world-class wines served here.

Recently we visited McMinnville, with its numerous brick buildings and tree-lined streets. The town is said to have more than 250 wineries within a 20-miles radius. In town, my wife and I walk and bike to wine-tasting rooms, including Willamette Valley Vineyards, which features the 2017 Whole Cluster Pinot Noir, a charming fruit-forward varietal.

We also stopped by The Eyrie Vineyards. Eyrie founder and winemaker David Lett was one of the people who helped put Oregon on the world wine map, planting one of the state's first commercial vineyards of Pinot Noir grapes and surprising French winemakers with a third-place finish in an international competition in 1979. Lett passed away in 2008, but his family continues to produce excellent Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris wines.

At the end of the day, Mica and I relaxed at the rooftop bar at McMenamins Hotel Oregon and enjoyed the incomparable view of the area.

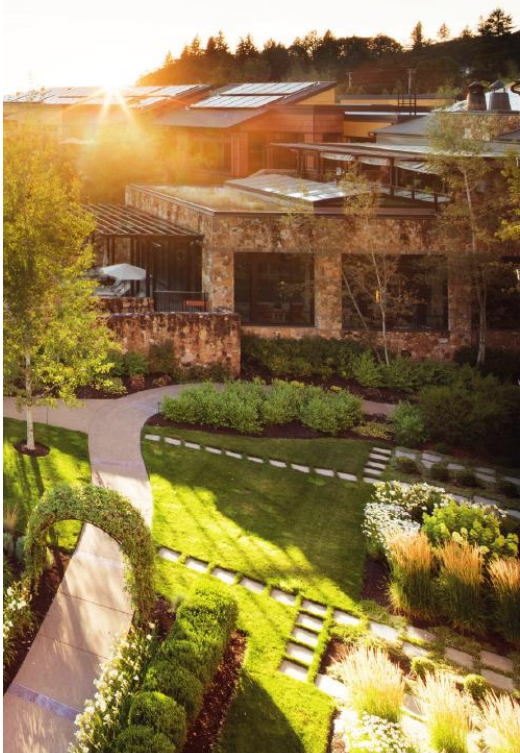
Less than 10 miles north of McMinnville is



» Clockwise from left: Carlton's landmark grain elevator greets visitors to town. The Allison Inn & Spa is a popular area retreat. Vineyards surround the Domaine Drouhin winery in the Dundee Hills. Flâneur Wines will open a new tasting room this summer in the Carlton grain elevator.

the bucolic town of Carlton, which has more than 20 wine-tasting rooms in the downtown area. Among them is Carlton Cellars, which sells tasty Pinot Noirs and white wine varietals, including Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris. The small tasting room leads right into the winery's barrel room, a great spot to sip wine and learn how oak affects both taste and price. Another favorite place is Cana's Feast Winery, specializing in lesser-known grape varietals, including Barbera and Sangiovese.

In 2003, acclaimed local winemaker Ken Wright made a handshake deal with a Carlton businessman to purchase part of the town's small business district, including two imposing grain towers and several red-brick buildings.



The deal's cornerstone was that Wright would agree to preserve the old structures.

Wright and his wife, Karen, have been major players in Carlton's revival ever since, working to pass zoning laws aimed at preserving the town's architectural character, with its many storefronts and brick buildings.

They have also renovated the city's former railroad depot into the stylish tasting room for Ken Wright Cellars, which specializes in creating wonderful single-vineyard Pinot Noir wines from 13 different vineyard sites.

The Wrights have partnered with other business owners on local projects such as The Winery Lofts, a group of apartmentlike hotel rooms that visitors can rent. The rooms are located on Main Street. A block away is The Horse Radish restaurant, one of our favorite wine-country stops for a sandwich or cheese plate. Also in the area is the wonderful Carlton Bakery, where we often buy fresh, steaming-hot baguettes. Work is underway to convert one of the downtown grain elevators into a tasting room and garden patio for Flâneur

Wines. Currently, the winery has opened a tasting room next to the elevator. Wright sold the grain elevators to the winery's owner, Marty Doerschlag, in 2013, and the new tasting room is expected to open this summer.

In the hills outside of Carlton are dozens of delightful wineries. One of our best new finds has been the renovated farmhouse that is home to Dominio IV Wines, just east of Carlton, where we've sampled great Pinot Noirs, a Viognier and a Grenache blend.

"My dad said when he would drive through Carlton in the 1970s that it was a boarded-up lumber town," Patrick Reuter, winemaker and co-owner of Dominio IV, told me during a visit. "Now you can see the evolution happening, the life running through the community."

A variety of wineries between Carlton and Dundee boast views of this spectacular landscape of rolling hills. Three standouts are Anne Amie Vineyards, Stoller Family Estate and Domaine Drouhin Oregon. All three wineries are known for their excellent Pinot Noirs.

Anne Amie also serves top-quality Pinot Gris

and Pinot Blanc wines. Stoller makes Chardonnays and refreshingly dry Pinot Noir Rosés, and Domaine Drouhin has Chardonnays that are known for their bright and crisp acidity.

The nearby community of Dundee offers a number of world-class wineries, including Élevée Winegrowers, located just to the northwest of town. For the past decade, owners Tom and France Fitzpatrick have tended the 5-acre vineyard that surrounds their home, and have now opened a small tasting room on the property. On weekends they welcome visitors to explore their garden while sipping a glass of single-vineyard Pinot Noir or Riesling. The Fitzpatricks are gracious hosts, treating new visitors like long-lost friends.

In Dundee, you'll find some of the region's best restaurants, including the Red Hills Market, with its wood-fired specialties, and The Dundee Bistro, serving delicious dishes such as pork loin, and linguine and prawns.

Not long ago, we visited Angela Estate tasting room, where General Manager Jessica Endsworth showed us samples of soil from the winery's vineyard and surrounding areas. She explained how different soils affect the development of the vines, giving the wines a distinctive fruit profile, supple tannin, voluptuous mouthfeel and ample baking spice character.

She offered us some soil to take home. We passed on the soil but, along with several superb bottles of wine, left with more warm memories of Willamette Valley wine country. ✈

Alex Pulaski writes from Portland, Oregon.