

Southern Valley Tour

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The southern Willamette Valley begins in McMinnville and Dayton to the north and continues south to the Eugene and Springfield areas. It is home to two important American Viticultural Areas, McMinnville and Eola-Amity Hills, which together comprise roughly 80,000 acres north of Salem.

Soils in these AVAs tend to be shallower than elsewhere in the valley, producing smaller grapes with excellent concentration. Elevation ranges between 200 to 1,000 feet, and the area is protected by the Coast Range, which provides a weather shadow that decreases cold winds and rainfall.

The Pacific winds are one of the main climatic features of this region. According to Dan Rinke, wine grower at Johan Vineyards, a new winery open Memorial Day weekend, "The area benefits from the Van Duzer corridor breezes. Every day around three in the afternoon, the maritime breeze cools off the area, which lengthens ripening times and adds elegance to the wines made here."

The cooling effect also preserves acidity in the wines, which gives them a characteristic brightness.

The McMinnville AVA, which lies west of McMinnville and extends south toward the Van Duzer corridor, is Oregon's most westerly sub-appellation. Created in 2005, it comprises 14 wineries and 40,000 acres, 750 of which are planted.

McMinnville is known for its highly regarded International Pinot Noir Celebration, held annually in July, which gathers winemakers and enthusiasts from all over the world.

Located southeast of the McMinnville AVA and west northwest of Salem, the Eola Amity Hills AVA comprises 38,000 acres with 2000 under vine. It was officially formed in 2006, but pioneer Don Byard of Hidden Springs arrived well before in the 1970s.

Today, there are over 30 wineries in the Eola Amity Hills AVA. Fittingly, the name "Eola" derives from the Greek word, Aeolus. The ancient deity, Aeolus, was thought to be in charge of the winds.

Five to try

Cubanisimo Vineyards: 1754 Best Road NW. Open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Contact: (503) 588-1763.

Firesteed Cellars: 2200 N Pacific Highway, Rickreall. Open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Contact: (503) 623-8683.

Left Coast Cellars: 4225 N Pacific Highway, Rickreall. Open noon to 5 p.m. daily. Contact: (888) 831-4916.

Namasté Vineyards: 5600 Van Well Road, Dallas. Open noon to 6 p.m. May 23-25. Contact: (503) 623-4150.

Van Duzer Vineyards: 11975 Smithfield Road, Dallas. Open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. May 23-25. Contact: (503) 623-6420.