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Fall is wine-tour and festival season in the Northwest

By Paul Gregutt

VISITS TO wineries are especially exciting at this time of year, when the 2010 harvest and crush are in full swing. Depending upon the winery and the vagaries of the vintage, the grapes will stop rolling in right around the end of October, and many wineries and winery associations plan special events in November and early December.

Wherever you go, please remember, a designated driver is mandatory. Drink lots of water throughout the day, and don't taste wine on an empty stomach. Most wineries will offer between four and a dozen wines, but there is never a requirement to taste them all. Feel free to pick and choose. Notice the location of the dump buckets (usually right on the tasting room counter); if you plan to taste more than a half dozen wines, it's best to spit. (A good way to get comfortable is with a practice session at home, with water.) It is always appreciated if you buy some wine at each stop, but it's not required. If there is a tasting fee, it will usually be applied toward your purchase.

Here are some dates to mark on the calendar if you are thinking of getting away for a weekend in wine country.

!Salud! (Nov. 12-13). The Oregon Pinot Noir Auction is an annual fundraiser for vineyard workers' health care. On Friday, Domaine Drouhin hosts a preview auction and barrel tasting; on Saturday, the main auction and dinner take place in Portland's Governor Hotel. (www.saludauction.org)

Woodinville (Dec. 4-5). This weekend, the Woodinville wineries host their annual St. Nicholas Day Open Houses. Tickets are \$50 (\$40 for one day only). With new tasting rooms opening in Woodinville seemingly every week, visitors have a good chance of finding new places to explore, and the problem of overcrowding should be reduced. (www.woodinvillewinecountry.com)

South Seattle Artisan Wineries (Dec. 4 and 11). The five members of this South Seattle winery cluster will be open from 1 to 5 p.m. for pre-holiday

tastings. (<http://ssaw.info>)

Tri-Cities Wine Festival (Nov. 5-6). The 32nd annual staging of this Tri-Cities Wine Society event will be in Kennewick's Three Rivers Convention Center. It's a chance to taste 300 wines from 100 wineries, explore a variety of seminars, bid on wines at a silent auction, and try out the winners of the festival wine judging. (www.tcwinifest.com)

Walla Walla (Nov. 5-7, Dec. 3-5). The first weekend of November is an unofficial but widespread Fall Release event for many Walla Walla wineries, which host barrel tastings, wine dinners and an auction. Lodging fills up early, and restaurants get overbooked, so make reservations before you go. The December Holiday Barrel Tasting Weekend includes a Christmas parade in downtown Walla Walla. (www.wallawallawineries.com)

The weekend after Thanksgiving is when many Northwest wineries throw open their doors for barrel tastings, fall releases, and other food- and wine-related activities. It's also a great time to do some holiday-gift buying. Here are some links to regions offering special events and celebrations Nov. 26-28.

Yakima Valley. (www.wineyakimavalley.org)

Lake Chelan. (www.lakechelanwinevalley.com)

Columbia Gorge. (www.columbiagorgewine.com)

Washington's newest destination winery/resort is Swiftwater Cellars at Suncadia, just a few miles east of Snoqualmie summit. It opened in early September, headquartered in the rock-and-timber lodge, and includes a 12,000-case winery, the Hoist House restaurant, a wine-tasting bar, private dining rooms and a lounge that looks out on a golf course. On Nov. 25, a wine-oriented kickoff to the Suncadia Winter Fest is planned. Swiftwater is open daily from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Paul Gregutt is the author of "Washington Wines & Wineries." Find him at www.paulgregutt.com or write to paulgwine@me.com.

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