



PHOTO BY CHERYL JUEITEN

ALT WINE FEST OFFERS UNIQUE WINE SAMPLES

BY TAMARA BELGARD TURNER

When comparing wine festivals to musical artists, Alt Wine Fest resembles New York’s Wu Tang Clan. Stepping beyond the traditional boundaries of Oregon wine events, it’s more cutting edge and progressive. Alt Wine Fest consistently spotlights varieties beyond our tried and true Pinot Noir.

Known as “Oregon’s Other Wine Festival,” Alt Wine Fest is the brainchild of Sunday School Wine founders and self-proclaimed wine geeks, Mallory Smith and Martin Skegg. Since 2019, the event has increased in popularity, becoming the “greatest of all time” event for those in the know.

“Our attendees are curious and like exploring different wines, but they are by no means all wine buffs,” says Smith. “You can learn as much as you want, nerd out on the only Savagnin Rose grown in the U.S., or play giant Jenga on the lawn. Think of it as a pick-your-own-adventure wine festival.”

Often, we consider of Pinot Noir Oregon’s primary wine. No longer the only game in town, Alt Wine Fest reminds us how restrictive this may be. In fact, there are nearly 80 grape varieties grown in the state, and its high time you knew more about them.

Alt Wine Fest is Sunday, July 16, from 1-5 p.m. at Abbey Road Farm. Guests will enjoy a walkaround tasting with over 35 producers and more than 100 alternative (non-Pinot Noir) wines. General admission tickets: \$75. VIP tickets are \$125, and include the exclusive one-hour early entry, priority parking and wine tote. Want to leave the car at home? A shuttle service is available from Portland.

Expect some familiar faces, like Gamay Noir and Pinot Gris, but also lesser known varieties, including Mencía, Trousseau, Chasselas and Savagnin Rose. “We’ve made the aesthetic a bit different than your average wine event – no charcuterie plates and jazz bands, but instead tacos and a punk playlist,” says Smith. We want to keep it fun and down-to-earth, without any snobbiness.”

**ALT WINE FEST**  
 July 16, noon-5 p.m.  
 Abbey Road Farm, Carlton  
 General admission tickets: \$75  
 VIP tickets: \$125  
 www.altwinefest.com



PHOTO BY RICHARD DUVAL

WALLA WALLA CELEBRATES WIDELY-PLANTED GRAPE VARIETY

BY MICHELE FRANCISCO

It’s been nearly two decades since Miles Raymond, played by Paul Giamatti, shouted that he wouldn’t “drinking any (insert expletive here) Merlot,” in the movie *Sideways*. No one could have predicted how a fictional character would cause almost irreparable harm to the popular grape’s image by besmirching the varietal. Happily, memories fade. Now, Merlot is experiencing a revival of sorts; wine lovers are again attracted to its finesse and splendor.

Celebrate Walla Walla Valley Wine – Merlot presents the perfect opportunity to embrace this crowd-pleasing wine variety. Events are hosted throughout the Walla Walla Valley over three-days, starting with an informative seminar, followed by tastings, panel discussions and winemakers dinners.

Kelsey Albro Itämeri, owner and winemaker at itä Wines, is on Friday’s Wine Panel Presentation and Tasting and co-hosting a dinner set among the vines at Les Collines Vineyard. She says, “Merlot does so beautifully in the Walla Walla Valley and I’m beyond thrilled it is getting its due at Celebrate this year. Through thick and thin, Washington Merlot has always been stellar– I think of it as my ‘ride or die’ grape, and am honored to be sharing some of the itä bottlings during the event.”

Founded in 1983, L’Ecole N° 41 is Walla Walla’s third oldest winery. L’Ecole’s winemaker, Marcus Rafanelli, explained his enthusiasm for the grape, “Celebrate Merlot is such a special event for me. Merlot was my gateway into wine back in the early 2000s. It was the first wine I ever purchased and started me on a pathway toward my wine career. I now get to be a passionate advocate for the grape and Washington state.” Rafanelli will serve with Itämeri on Friday’s panel, along with hosting Thursday night’s Vintage Pour, presenting library samples from 1998 to 2013. Says Rafanelli, “I am very much looking forward to tasting great Merlots, eating great food with Merlot and sharing L’Ecole’s rich history of Merlot with guests who attend.”

“Celebrate Walla Walla Valley Wine – Merlot is the country’s only Merlot-focused wine event of this scale,” explains Liz Knapke, Executive Director of Walla Walla Valley Wine. “We believe that the Walla Walla Valley produces some of the world’s finest Merlot and are happy to showcase it alongside other acclaimed growing regions that craft the varietal.”

No doubt Miles’ invitation to this party was “lost in the mail.”