



MELT-IN-YOUR-MOUTH

sablefish—cooked sous vide, then finished in the oven—sits atop a pillow of polenta-stuffed cabbage bathed in wild garlic cream sauce. A dry, medium-bodied 2019 Washington Chardonnay complements the richness of the dish with subtle notes of oak and stone fruit.

I don't want this course to end.

But I'm only halfway through an exquisite dinner at the recently

launched **Kitchen at Abeja**. It started with a cloudlike gougère garnished with caviar, followed by a refreshing and tangy heirloom tomato salad topped with a dollop of marinated labneh. The third course is another standout: house-cured king salmon with apple, fennel and roe.

I'm savoring one last meal in wine country, capping a quick trip with longtime girlfriends. The six of us—all vaccinated, but still cautious because of the persisting COVID-19 pandemic—recently reunited after more than a year of weekly video calls. Walla Walla provided a world-class backdrop for a memorable, wine-filled weekend. With dozens of restaurants and more than 120 wineries in the region, it is—of course—impossible to visit them all in one visit.

Weekend in Wine Country

story and photos by Adriana Janovich





FRIDAY

Check-in is 3 p.m. at the **Haven**, a two-story historical home with keyless entry in the neighborhood of Whitman College. All rooms, including a charming sleeping porch, are well-appointed, and there's ample space for six, including a formal dining table and living room, backyard hot tub and picnic table, and expansive porch with a bench swing. The updated, bright kitchen comes stocked with plenty of wine glasses.

I have the shortest drive, a benefit of living in the Inland Northwest. So I pour six glasses of a red I brought from home, and they're ready and waiting for the arrival of the rest of us, all making the trip from the West Side. After a flurry of hellos, we toast our friendship and weekend to come. Within the hour, our driver arrives and we are off to our first winery.

The sprawling estate of **Tranche Cellars**, nestled just east of town in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, features live music, wine by the glass or bottle, and, often, food trucks on Friday nights from April through October.



It's popular with locals and visitors alike, and the grounds are peppered with lawn chairs, games of corn hole, and groups of families and friends. We choose a spot on the grass halfway between the vendors and outdoor stage and spread out across three picnic blankets. It's a short walk to the tasting room, and we make several trips, sharing bottles of the 2015 Pape Blanc, with hints of stone fruit and honeysuckle, and the brighter, more intense 2015 Chardonnay. Dinner is tacos, quesadillas, and burritos from the **Tacos La Monarca** food truck.

Music is over by 8 p.m., and we head back to the Haven to get in some hot tub time before the backyard outdoor quiet hours kick in at 10 p.m. We agree: our Walla Walla wine weekend is off to a great start.

SATURDAY

It's a leisurely morning, sharing coffee, conversation, and a variety of buttery pastries—Danishes with fresh berries, and pistachio, citrus and almond croissants—from **Walla Walla Bread Company**.

Our driver for today's custom five-hour wine-tasting tour arrives early with bottles of water. Not only does he keep us hydrated, but he keeps us on schedule so we don't miss our reservations.

First stop is **Woodward Canyon**, 13 miles west of Walla Walla in Lowden. Established in 1981, it's the second-oldest winery in the valley. (Only **Leonetti Cellar**, founded in 1977, is older.) As we make our way through our first flight of the day, our driver heads back into town to pick up lunch. **Graze** specializes in soups, salads, panini and cold sandwiches, such as banh mi, steak with chimichurri, and grilled chicken with bacon, tomato, basil mayo, lettuce and provolone.

After we eat, we load our wine purchases into the van and walk to the next stop. It's next door. **L'Ecole No. 41**, founded in 1983, is the valley's third-oldest winery. It's located in the historic Frenchtown schoolhouse, where a table is waiting for us on the patio.

It's a ten-minute drive to **Reininger Winery**, just west of Walla

Walla on Old Highway 12. I'm familiar with some of their offerings; Reininger owns and operates **Helix Tasting Room** in downtown Spokane. But this marks my first visit to the winery. We take a large, low, corner table and opt for the classic tasting. We have to hurry, though, to make our final booking of the day.



Our tour ends in the **Chihuly Tasting Room** at **Long Shadows Winery**, where we sit under a purple-and-gold sculpture by renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly. The portfolio tasting starts with 2019 Poet's Leap, a lively Riesling with citrus aromas, and ends with the 2017 Sequel, a full-bodied Syrah with hints of blueberry, blackberry, black pepper and cassis. It's over too quickly—this tasting and the entire tour.

We're dropped off downtown, where we walk along the bustling **Main Street**, browse the racks at **Walla Walla Clothing Co.** and linger over jewelry, home décor, novelties and gifts at **35th+Butter**.



There's live music at the **Plaza on First**, part of a **Summer Concert Series** which runs from mid July to mid September. We stop and listen for a bit before deciding to sneak in one more winery, sharing a bottle of rosé on the sidewalk patio at **Marc Ryan Winery** before dinner.



We have a reservation on the sidewalk patio at **Hattaway's on Alder**, where we share appetizers: pimento cheese on crostini, duck pate and roasted bone marrow with grilled bread, flash-fried corn with gremolata, fresh potato chips with caramelized onion sour cream, and knife-cut fries. I opt for the pan-seared sockeye salmon with sweet corn purée and blistered cherry tomatoes. Other mains: pan-seared halibut cheeks with grits, Manchego cream and tomato confit; heirloom tomato salad with bleu cheese and smoked eggplant vinaigrette, and celery Parmesan salad with hazelnuts, poached figs and lemon vinaigrette.

SUNDAY

We sleep in, then share another round of pastries as we pack and tidy the AirBnb. The gals get on the road early. But I have a shorter drive and get to linger longer. I book another tasting and dinner at **Abeja Winery**, located on a thirty-eight-acre historical farmstead seven miles east of town.

As soon as I park, I'm greeted with a glass of chilled Chardonnay. "We want every experience to be curated and personalized," winery hospitality manager Will Wenholz explains as we walk toward the fully renovated barn that doubles as the tasting room and dining room.

Wenholz leads me through a tasting, including another Chardonnay and the light and fruit-forward 2019 Beekeeper's Blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. It ends with a rich and age-able 2018 Merlot with notes of fig, black tea, baking spices and cassis, followed by the also age-able 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon with hints of huckleberry and walnut.

Before dinner, I walk the grounds of the winery and **Inn at Abeja**, admiring the vineyards, pollinator garden, view of Titus Creek from the Carriage House patio, and five-bedroom, turn-of-the-20th-century farmhouse. I already wish I could stay another night. Or two.

Soon, I'm halfway through dinner, which ends with herb-crusted lamb with courgette and

potato crème, blackberry and Cabernet sorbet, and babà with huckleberries and lemon crème. I just wish my girlfriends could experience it with me. Dinner, created by executive chef Elodie Li to highlight locally sourced ingredients, is by reservation only for parties of up to six people. We would have just made the cut. Wine pairing is optional. And the five- or seven-course prix fixe menu changes weekly.

"My advice: do the seven courses," says Tom Uberuaga, food and beverage director at the Kitchen at Abeja. "Maybe don't end your weekend here but start it here. You won't want to leave." 🍷



if you go

Here's a round-up of the wineries, restaurants, services, and shops we visited or used on our trip.

Stay

- The Haven: facebook.com/havenwallawalla/

Let others do the driving

- Private transportation: Evelyn Smith, (509) 386-3280
- Freddy G's Wine Tours: freddygs.com, (509) 386-7636

Wine

- Tranche Cellars: tranche.wine
- Woodward Canyon: woodwardcanyon.com
- L'Ecole No. 41: lecole.com
- Reinger Winery: reingerwinery.com
- Long Shadows Winery: longshadows.com
- Marc Ryan Winery: markryanwinery.com

Eats

- Tacos La Monarca: Search Facebook for Tacos La Monarca
- Walla Walla Bread Company: w2breadco.com
- Graze: grazeevents.com
- Hattaway's on Alder: hattawaysonalder.com

Downtown shopping and entertainment

- Walla Walla Clothing Co.: wallawallaclothing.com
- 35⁺+Butter: facebook.com/35BUTTER/
- Downtown Walla Walla Foundation: downtownwww.com

Stay, wine and dine

- Abeja Winery, Inn at Abeja, and Kitchen at Abeja: abeja.net