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Top 10 wine regions worth a second look

Oregon's Willamette Valley and Mendocino, Calif., among underrated destinations



GREG WAHL-STEPHENS / AP

Oregon's famous pinot noir grapes are shown on the vines at Erath Vineyard in Dundee, Ore. Visitors are pouring into the Willamette Valley's vineyards each year, just a 45-minute drive from Portland.

By Ted Loos



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It's easy to have your head turned by the famous, glamorous wine regions: Sure, Napa's great, and Bordeaux can't be beat. But some of the most soulful places in the world of wine are often passed over or pigeonholed based on factors like geography and reputation. Some of these regions are just taking root while others are long-established, but a visit to any of these top 10 wine regions worth a second look could

forever change your idea of what to drink with dinner – not to mention what it's like to visit a winery (no limos in sight).

1. Alsace, France

First impression Everybody has heard of France's Alsace region, but too few people outside the area actually drink the wines.

Second look The stellar whites from this lovely area bordering Germany – mainly gewürztraminers, rieslings, and pinot gris – are among the most sophisticated and food-friendly on the planet. They're second to none with spicy Asian dishes because of the natural aromatics in the grapes as well as the high acid levels that develop in a chilly climate.

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Stop in Headquartered in the fairy-tale town of Riquewihir, full of half-timbered houses with fanciful turrets, the winery Hugel et Fils (www.hugel.com/en) has been perfecting the family craft since 1639. When a bottle as refreshing and flavorful as the Hugel Riesling Classic 2007 costs just \$11, it's time to reconsider the whole region and deem it a superb value zone among wine regions.

Check in Done up like a local tobacco barn, the stellar Hotel des Berges (www.hoteldesberges.com) on the willow-dotted banks of the Ill River gives travelers a luxurious embrace, and it's next door to the world-famous restaurant L'Auberge de l'Ill (www.auberge-de-l-ill.com), a recipient of three Michelin stars. The room service breakfasts are among the most memorable (and calorie rich) one might ever have.

2. Colchagua Valley, Chile

First impression Chile is the land of cheap and cheerful wines.

Second look The whole country, in particular this part of the larger Rapel Valley, has made huge strides in developing the super-premium category over the last decade. Colchagua, just 100 miles from the capital city of Santiago, specializes in lush, plus-red wines that are broad-shouldered but not too tannic to drink when young. Cabernet sauvignon, syrah, malbec, and carmenère varieties rule, and some of the best bottles are a blend of two or more grape types, like Montes's Alpha M (\$98). When it comes to choosing a style, many winemakers here

revere traditional red Bordeaux.

Stop in Montes has been a leader since the winery was founded in 1987, and it had the distinction of making Chile's first premium wine for export. One sip of Montes Purple Angel 2007 (\$72) shows the level of sophistication: The blackberry and spice notes in this carmenère-based wine have finesse that lingers on the palate. (Give this one some decanting.) The winery itself was designed according to feng shui principles, with lovely pools of water at the entrance. A guest can reserve a tour by visiting its website (www.monteswines.com).

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wine regions worth a second look – a place where one can still see cowboys with spurs on their boots. Residencia Histórica de Marchihue (www.residenciahistorica.com) has 22 rooms and an off-the-beaten-track appeal. The meals, made from vegetables, meat, and fruit raised right there on the estate, are hard to beat.

3. Jerez de la Frontera, Spain

First impression Sherry is for old ladies.

Second look Sherry is a whole wine category unto itself of nearly infinite variety; seasoned drinkers and young bucks can all find something that works for them. This fortified wine offers styles from bone-dry (the fino style) to dessert in a glass (Pedro Ximinez, which is often poured over vanilla ice cream), with many types in between, such as the tangy, yet caramely Palo Cortado. Anyone who can't find a bottle to suit may simply lack imagination.

Stop in If one still needs convincing, Emilio Lustau (www.lustau.es/index_en.html) is the bodega that might do it. It excels at producing every style – even sherry vinegar. For beginners, the Lustau Manzanilla Papirusa (\$15) is the best introduction to the category. Manzanillas are pale and famously taste briny like the ocean – remember they are white wines, but with a kick of extra alcohol – and this one has a lemony character to boot. Served with salted almonds, it makes sherry newbies sit up and take notice.

Check in The city of Jerez, the hub of the sherry trade near Spain's southern coast, is steeped in Moorish culture and doubles as a center of flamenco. The yellow facade and gold fabrics in the rooms of the Hotel Villa Jerez (www.hace.es/hotelvillajerez) evoke the color of a good fino. A swimming pool and a spa, plus a tony neighborhood of grand homes, complete the lavish picture of one of our top wine regions worth another look.

4. Languedoc, France

First impression The south of France is only about rosé.

Second look Sunny, hot weather and mild winters mean that the traditional Rhône varietals like syrahs, mourvèdres, and grenaches are right at home in Languedoc, the region just to the west of Provence. Big, juicy reds can be had at good prices; think of it as France's Australia.

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Stop in Grilled meat holds its own with the Mas Belles Eaux Les Coteaux 2005 (\$21), a peppery, spicy blend of grenache, syrah, and mourvèdre that is full of red fruit goodness and lingers on the finish. Belles Eaux (www.masbelleseaux.com), where grapes have been cultivated for hundreds of years, gives lie to the notion that the French aren't welcoming: Every summer Wednesday night, the winery holds a free tasting and tapas party under the massive oaks located behind its renovated orangerie.

Check in Languedoc is huge compared to other wine regions, so after driving its winding roads for a day one will want an impressive place to rest. Former rugby star Gérard Bertrand, a local wine estate owner, created just that in 2002 when he took over Château L'Hospitalet (www.chateaulhospitalet.com). He offers 38 rooms in a stone maison surrounded by vines, Mediterranean views, and a restaurant serving nouvelle cuisine. Bertrand's view of culture is expansive: He hosts local artists' studios on-site and sells their wares, too.

5. Margaret River, Australia

First impression Seems like the far side of the moon.

Second look Flanked by two oceans, the Margaret River area has unusually stable growing temperatures for vines. Located on Australia's western side and four hours south of Perth by car, it's light years away from the country's population centers and other wine regions. But splendid isolation

works well in this case: The traditional Bordeaux grapes – including cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, and sémillon – thrive, as do the winemakers, who surf on some of Australia's biggest waves during their off-hours.

Stop in When one thinks of Australia, shiraz comes to mind. The Cape Mentelle (www.capementelle.com.au) winery makes a wide range of wines, but its fruity and peppery shiraz (the '05 costs \$24) rises above many versions from better-known areas. Best of all, the winery is visitor-friendly, offering a 2-hour degustation tour and tasting for \$60 a person.

Check in The über-laid-back vibe in Margaret River makes Sonoma look positively uptight. But a dash of sleek luxury can be found at the Injidup Spa Retreat (www.injidupsparetreat.com.au), along the Indian Ocean and minutes away by car from some

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major vineyards. By the private plunge pool on a guest-room deck, one can watch whales frolicking. The 10 rooms sport modern decor and West Australian art.

6. Mendocino, California

First impression Mendocino’s best crop is, um, herbal in nature.

Second look Napa and Sonoma’s immediate northern neighbor is an under-sung, cool growing area for grapes, and the small Anderson Valley is the standout appellation. The pinot noir, zinfandel, and chardonnay from there don’t need heavy oaking to make their case; the best ones have naturally vibrant fruit flavors. The proof is that many wineries based in Napa and elsewhere have bought vineyards in Mendocino, with additional purchases expected.

Stop in With a deft touch, Navarro Vineyards (www.navarrowine.com) excels at crafting the wines California producers in other wine regions usually botch: rosé (\$15), pinot grigio (\$15), and gewürztraminer (\$19) in particular. The fine specimens from this small, family-owned operation are sometimes hard to find in wine shops (though one can order them online), making it all the more sensible to stop by in person after reserving a tour online.

Check in The owners of the Boonville Hotel (www.boonvillehotel.com) bills it as a “modern roadhouse.” The funky and rustic 10-room inn exemplifies Mendocino’s unpretentious appeal: Meals are served

family-style, and dogs are welcome at the hotel for a \$25 charge. Located at the southern end of the wine trail, the hotel provides an extremely handy base for visiting the Anderson Valley wineries along Route 128.

7. Niagara, Ontario

First impression Nice falls. Wait, are those grapes over there?

Second look Located between the famous falls and Lake Ontario, just across the Niagara River from New York State, this small Canadian peninsula produces superior ice wines. The unique microclimate facilitates extreme winemaking more than other wine regions: The harsh winter’s frozen grapes end up with naturally enhanced sugar levels, which are captured in the wine. This is a chance to get over one’s fear of sweets.

Stop in Inniskillin (www.inniskillin.com) is the

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leading winery in the area, and until one has sampled the perfumed, rich, and berry-laden Inniskillin Ice Wine Cabernet Franc '06 (\$95), it's hard to understand how good dessert wine can be. Its high acidity evens out all the sweetness and prevents any cloying excess; the taste is far more balanced than one might imagine.

Check in Queen's Landing (www.vintagehotels.com) is a Georgian-style manse with traditional decor located in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. (Picture a less crowded version of Napa's St. Helena.) After a day of tasting at wineries, hit the spa and have yourself swaddled in a rose-petal wrap for \$100. Traveler's tip: When planning a visit to the area, fly into Buffalo since navigating Toronto's airport security can be trying.

8. Piedmont, Italy

First impression This area's flagship barolo and barbaresco wines are awesome, but way too expensive.

Second look Piedmont's supporting player, barbera, is a red grape used to make lively and refreshing wine that's often accented by a taste of currant. A barbera wine is always welcome at the table because of its fresh and zingy profile. At times the wine can rival its more famous nebbiolo-based cousins, barolo and barbaresco, in complexity – but always at a fraction of the price. Barbera d'Alba, meaning made near the hub city of Alba, is the most promising designation to look for on bottles.

Stop in Vietti (www.vietti.com) is a family-owned winery based in the quaint town of Castiglione Falletto. Renowned for its colorful labels, all with natural themes, the winery turns out top barolo while also taking Barbera d'Alba very seriously. The Vietti Barbera D'Alba Tre Vigne 2007 (\$25) is a heady, violet-scented example of the grape's potential; try a bottle with veal Milanese and admire the grasshopper staring back from the label.

Check in Another high-quality, family-run winery in the Alba area, Boroli, runs a swank, hilltop inn with spectacular views called Locanda del Pilone (www.locandadelpilone.com). With just eight rooms and a restaurant with a Michelin star, this former farmhouse is a gemlike boutique property. The restaurant features the winery's own creations but also offers top bottlings from wine regions far and wide.

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9. Rias Baixas, Spain

First impression Spain means red wine.

Second look The region of Galicia, in the country’s northwest corner, is the exception to the rest of sunny Spain’s wine regions. In the Rias Baixas wine zone, the weather is cool and rainy, much like in southern Ireland. Albariño is an unassuming grape and hardly world famous, but it thrives in that climate, producing fantastic dry white wines that are perfect for pairing with seafood dishes, such as paella, all over Spain.

Stop in Filled with melon-ball oomph, the zingy Don Olegario Albariño Rias Baixas (\$22) – from a small, appointment-only winery (www.donolegario.com) – is a crystal clear expression of why this grape beguiles. It’s hard to find a bottle for more than \$25.

Check in Galicia’s capital, Santiago de Compostela, is about an hour-and-a-half drive from Rias Baixas wine country. The city is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the world because of its cathedral, which holds the tomb of St. James; part of the town is a Unesco World Heritage site. For a true old-world experience, stay at the grand, antiques-filled Hostal de Los Reyes Catolicos (www.paradores-spain.com/spain/pscompostela.html), adjacent to the cathedral. The swagger and gilt is a nice contrast to albariño’s relative humility.

10. Willamette Valley, Oregon

First impression Who doesn’t love those great, if pricey, pinot noirs?

Second look Pinot gris – from the same grape that gives us pinot grigio in Italy – is the dominant white wine produced in the fantastically fertile Willamette Valley, but it doesn’t have a distinct reputation among many Americans. The elegant and floral character of these wines, often priced at less than \$20, makes them ideal for summertime drinking as well as for the Thanksgiving table, when paired with sweet potato.

Stop in ’Tis a rare white wine that has the intensity and weight of the Ponzi Vineyards Pinot Gris 2009 (\$15), which is bursting with melon and elderflower flavors. Family-owned Ponzi (www.ponziwines.com) welcomes visitors to the tasting room and to the bocce court, as well.

Check in For decades, the Willamette Valley lacked the luxury accommodations found in other wine regions, perhaps because the proximity of Portland (just a 45-minute drive

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away) encouraged day trips. But the year-old Allison Inn & Spa (www.theallison.com) has changed all that with a comprehensive spa (try the gentle Divine Wine Facial for \$115), big rooms, and an overall look that's clean and modern but never cold with its accents of dark wood and nubby wool fabrics. Make sure to reserve a table at Jory, the Allison's locavore restaurant, to sample produce from the property's garden.

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