

FOOD & DRINK

Tri-Cities: The new West Coast wine country

Marissa Tejada, CNN • Published 16th October 2018



(CNN) — Washington wine country has had its skeptics.

"When my grandfather claimed that the best wine grapes could be grown here, I remember people telling him that he was crazy," says JJ Williams.

Turns out that Williams' grandfather was a visionary. Today, three generations of his family are at the helm of the successful Kiona Vineyards just outside of the Tri-Cities, a desert region east of Seattle and well past the Cascade Mountains where dry, flattened hilltops peppered with sagebrush once lacked electricity, water and people.

Today, the Tri-Cities area -- Richland, Kennewick and Pasco -- has reinvented itself as one of the premier wine growing-regions in the United States and a fast-growing travel hub for wine lovers.

"My brother and I rode our bikes through this sea of dusty brown with tiny islands of green. What stands out today are tiny islands of brown. It's all planted now," says Williams. Washington's 60,000 acres of vineyard land have the potential to expand to 200,000 acres of premium wine grapes within the next two decades, according to estimates from Ste. Michelle Wine Estates CEO Ted Baseler.

What sets Washington apart is that it shares the same latitude as the world-famous Burgundy and Bordeaux regions of France. Tri-Cities winemakers say they work with ideal temperatures and rainfall and the right soil conditions to produce intense fruit.

Wine travelers are taking notice.

"Washington state has the potential to have more premium grapes than California and there's more to come," says Abbey Cameron, who is director at the [Walter Clore Wine and Culinary Center](#), a modern tasting room and industry meeting place.

"The scenery is uniquely beautiful, but wine tasting here also means experiencing premium wines at a great value," Cameron says.

There are 200 wineries within a 50-mile radius, according to [Visit Tri-Cities](#).

The Clore Center, which serves as a starting point for travelers exploring the area's scenic wine trails that run along a vast landscape of beige, camelback hills flush with vineyards, welcomed 17,000 winery visitors last year, nearly double the number of guests passing through its doors when it opened in 2014.

To keep up with the growth, the center promotes more than 80 wine tourism activities, a figure that has doubled since last year.

Area visitors can sip wines at stylish and rustic tasting rooms set off charming dirt roads including [Goose Ridge Estate Vineyard & Winery](#), [Kitzke Cellars](#) and [Hightower Cellars](#). There is a choice of fine wine restaurants known for locally inspired menus including [The Kitchen at Barnard Griffin Winery](#), [Taverna Tagaris](#) and [Fiction at J. Bookwalter winery](#). [Water2Wine Cruises](#) combines wine tasting and a smooth cruise down the Columbia River. Horseback riding is another way to visit the area's tasting rooms.

Guests can also book stays at wine-themed boutique hotels such as [The Lodge at Columbia Point](#) in Richland or bed and breakfasts set in the rural heart of desert wine country.

Land of opportunity

As Tri-Cities vineyards spread across the landscape, replacing fruit farmland or taking over what was once stretches of empty desert, JJ Williams says a tenacious Western frontiersman spirit has made a difference.

"People here built something from nothing. We're not investors or billionaires. At Kiona, our 240 acres are under vine, and my dad and I helped farm it all."

He says that unlike at big estate wineries, guests are more likely to find themselves having conversations with local winemakers (like himself) and wine families (like his own).

"We're proud of our humble hospitality. That's because multiple generations have been farming here for 200 years. We know the land and collectively our community has developed a special camaraderie. We organize and collaborate because we can't afford that there be bad wine from these parts," says Williams.

Just as determined are the artisan winemakers who relocated to this far-flung corner of the West Coast in a quest to find the best vineyard land. With focused intent, they improve their fruit to produce their dream wines.

That's why Shae Frichette of Frichette Winery made the move from California nine years ago, starting a winery with her husband, Greg.

They're now raising their young son, Jayden, at their country house right next to their scenic wine-tasting room on Red Mountain -- one of the state's highly respected premier American Viticultural Areas (AVA).

"When deciding to move from California, we agreed that we need to do something that gives us goosebumps," Shae Frichette said. "We went for our dream to be winemakers here because we knew we'd have a chance in the industry. We were right."

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