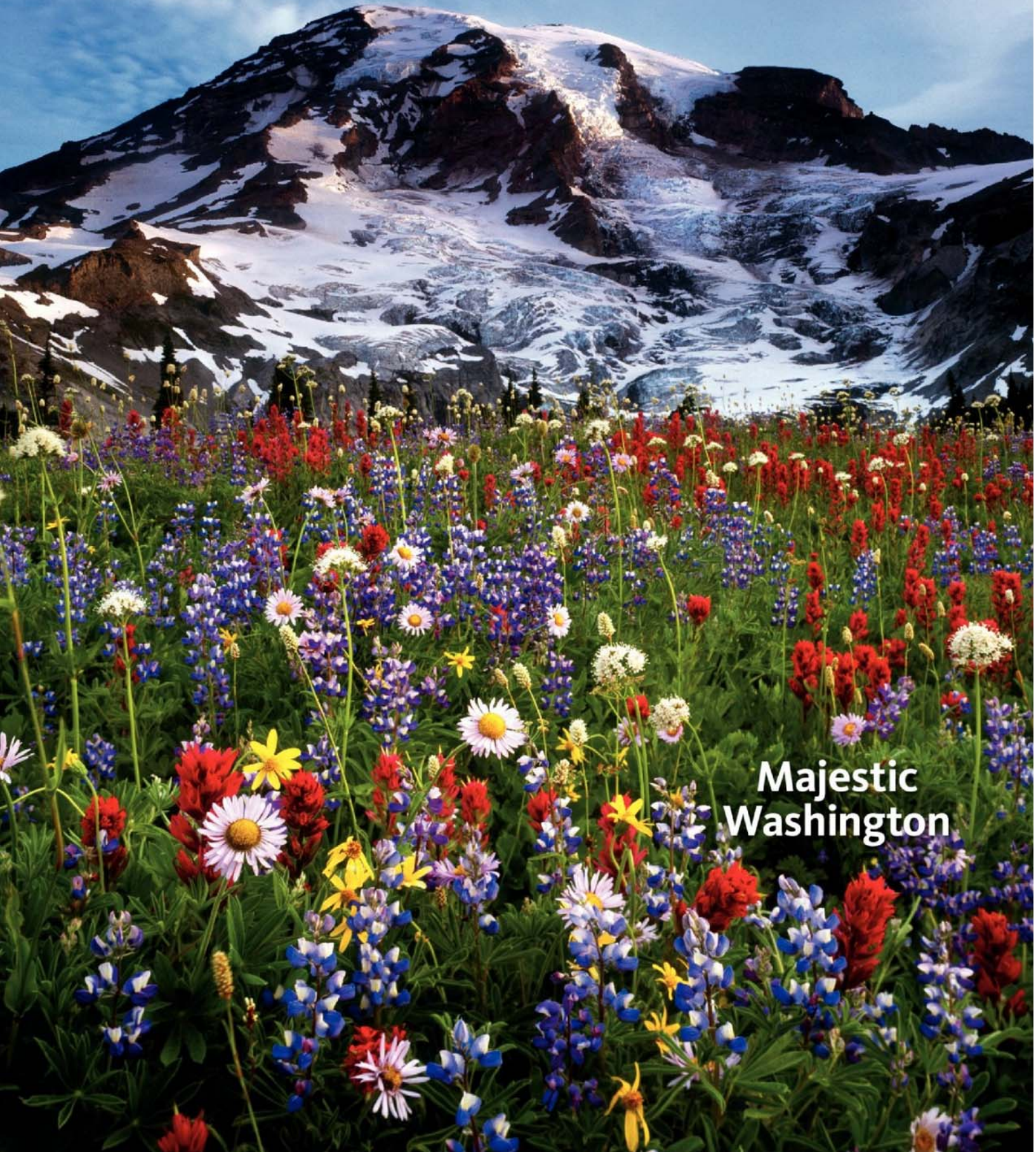


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## Culinary Heartland

The fertile Wenatchee Valley yields a bountiful harvest

By Paul Clarke

It's a crisp and sunny morning at Tiny's Organic Farm, and Greg McPherson is talking about arugula. Greg grows the vegetable along with radishes and other salad staples on his Wenatchee Valley farm, and while he's justifiably proud of the quality of these vegetables, for most of his farmers market customers, the real stars at Tiny's come from the fruit trees that populate the property's orchards. "Many people buy vegetables because they have to," he says, "but they buy fruit because they like it."

Since 1979, Greg has grown apples in this Central Washington valley that's legendary for them; when he started, he says, the options were mostly limited to Red or Golden Delicious. Today he grows a wide range of varieties—from the familiar Gala and Fuji to heirloom apples such as Esopus Spitzenberg, Arkansas Black and Golden Russet. Greg's other crops include Rainier and Lapin cherries, Sweet Scarlet peaches, aprium and pluot hybrids, Arctic Queen nectarines, and dozens of other types of fruit.

Diverse edible offerings are a common theme throughout the Wenatchee Valley. Located roughly 140 miles east of Seattle along the Columbia River, the valley is surrounded by gently rounded, sage-covered hills, with the craggy North Cascades rising to the northwest as a rugged backdrop. The valley and the surrounding region are home to some of Washington's most vibrant agricultural land. The fertility of the region inspires many of the owners of area farms and orchards to expand their range of produce. During the warmer months, farm stands in Wenatchee, Yakima, Chelan and Leavenworth have tables stacked with seasonal fruit—from late-spring strawberries to summer's peaches and cherries, to early autumn's apples and pears—as well as vegetables such as asparagus and specialized produce.

The region's sun-drenched hills are also home to numerous vineyards and wineries, and today, specialty-food producers—from artisan cheesemakers and bakers to small-scale coffee roasters—are adding diversity to the Wenatchee Valley's remarkable richness of flavor.

**Less than a mile** up a rural road from Greg's farm, Peter Ringsrud has been growing apples since 1973. In 2009, Peter and

Opposite: Flowering apple and pear trees next to the Wenatchee River are a lovely sign of spring. Top right: Greg McPherson, owner of Tiny's Organic Farm, drives a tractor past blossoming peach trees. Right: Saint Laurent Estate Winery's scenic grounds, overlooking the Columbia River, feature a garden and pond.

his family added a new offering to their juicy produce when they opened a cidery in part of Peter's shop. There, they started Snowdrift Cider Company, one of fewer than a dozen artisan-hard-cider producers in Washington, and the only one based in the apple-rich Wenatchee Valley. Snowdrift's goal, Peter's son Lars explains, is to create a typically rich, complex beverage inspired by the traditional hard ciders from England and the northeastern United States, while introducing a distinctive regional character.

"There's a lot of popularity for full-flavored beverages in the Northwest," Lars says, noting the regional prevalence of hoppy India pale ales, rich-roasted coffees and full-bodied red wines. "Northwest cider is not a recognized style yet, but it's interesting to see if we can do something different."

The Ringsruds began growing cider apples in 2006, and they also purchase apples from a grower in East Wenatchee. Typically smaller and more tart than common table apples, cider apples give depth and character to a cider, and their tannins can introduce flavors ranging from an astringent sourness to an ethereal smokiness, to the lushness of caramel and vanilla. Snowdrift uses more than a dozen varieties of apples, including the bittersweet Yarlington Mill, the Muscadet de Dieppe and the Bramley, a high-acid type of fruit prized in chef's circles. These characteristics play out well in Snowdrift's ciders. The English-style dry cider has a pleasant, chalky dryness and a crisp snap; the Orchard Select has a summery brightness of



COURTESY: TINY'S ORGANIC FARM

peaches, green apples and pineapple; and the Cliffbreaks Blend is rich and full-bodied, with flavors of caramel and spice.

**While the Wenatchee Valley** is virtually synonymous with apples, most of the region's grower-to-glass abundance comes from local vineyards. The immediate Wenatchee vicinity has more than 10 wineries—ranging from estate wineries such as Stemilt Creek to producers such as Chateau Faire Le Pont, featuring The Chateau Restaurant. Another two dozen



COURTESY: SAINT LAURENT ESTATE WINERY

wineries can be found in the area extending north to Lake Chelan and west to Leavenworth.

On a ridge a few miles southeast of Wenatchee, Saint Laurent Estate Winery offers sweeping vistas of the Columbia River, and the orchards and farms that spread into the distance. The winery may be relatively young—its first vintage was in 2003—but it has a history extending back more than 100 years. Laura and Michael Mrachek have been growing berries and tree fruit for 35 years on this land, which was homesteaded by Michael's family. Eleven years ago, they began growing grapes, which they sold to wineries including Columbia Crest and Chateau Ste. Michelle. They still sell grapes to these wineries, but, several years ago, the Mracheks realized the benefit of taking some of those grapes and making their own wine.

"We can custom-grow the grapes, choose the varieties we want and cherry-pick the barrels for our blends," Laura says. "It's just a whole lot of fun."

Saint Laurent's winemakers use seven varieties of grapes, grown in three farming locations the Mracheks operate in the region, to produce wines that visitors may sample in the winery's tasting room, located in a 1918 Sears, Roebuck kit-home furnished with French antiques. A 2007 Chardonnay is modestly oaked, with a creamy mouthfeel and a bright character of apples and honeydew, while a 2005 Syrah has a smoky, peppery aroma and a dry flavor tinged with blackberries and currants. Saint Laurent also produces blends



DAVID WHITE/OLD TIME CIDER

such as a medium-bodied Lucky Red and a Lucky White, and a La Boheme label for varieties the wine-makers determine are extraordinary blends.

**Of course, the best companion** to good wine is good food. Entrepreneurial chefs specializing in creative cuisine have begun opening restaurants in the Wenatchee area, contributing to the region's growing appeal as a dining destination. An example of such a restaurant, located in the town's historic center, is Famè, which serves contemporary Italian-American cuisine in an intimate setting.

Another establishment serving dishes with creative flair is The IvyWild Inn, a Wenatchee bed-and-breakfast in a historic three-story house from the 1930s. Although IvyWild currently serves food only to its guests, owners Richard and Ashley Kitos are launching a new restaurant that will be open to the public, as well as a catering operation, both scheduled to open this fall. For years the couple



COURTESY: SNOWDRIFT CIDER CO.

Top left: Snowdrift Cider Company's beverages include Cliffbreaks Blend, Orchard Select, Semi-Dry Cider and Dry Cider. Above: Peter Ringsrud, owner of Snowdrift, checks freshly picked cider apples.

lived in Los Angeles, then in 2009 moved to Ashley's native Wenatchee to open IvyWild, and to raise their three young daughters. Now Richard is taking his many years of experience as a chef in Southern California and applying those skills to the region's fresh, local ingredients.

One evening this past spring, my wife, Leonora, and I sampled Kitos' cooking. We

COURTESY: OHME GARDENS



More than 100 varieties of plants thrive in Ohme Gardens' spectacular setting above the Columbia River.

## OHME GARDENS

In between perusing the produce at Wenatchee Valley farm stands and sipping the local Syrah, be sure to look into some of the outdoor activities the region has to offer. Since 1929, one of the most engaging places to visit has been Ohme Gardens in Wenatchee. Located on a high, rocky bluff overlooking the Columbia River, the gardens cover nine acres, with almost a mile of stone walking paths that lead visitors past rolling lawns, hidden ponds and waterfalls, and steeply terraced gardens. Beneath a canopy of red cedar, mountain hemlock and fir, the gardens feature a vibrant mixture of flora. A shaded path leads past beds of purple periwinkles, anemones and blooming heather, while buttercups and columbine blossom on a sunny hillside overlooking the valley. No food is allowed in the gardens, but there's a shaded picnic area outside the entrance, so visitors can bring some of the region's edible bounty to enjoy before exploring one of the area's most beautiful attractions.

*Ohme Gardens, located at 3327 Ohme Road in Wenatchee, is open daily from April 15 through October 15. For more information, call 509-662-5785 or visit [www.ohmegardens.com](http://www.ohmegardens.com).*



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started with rich pork carnitas and tiny sweet-potato pancakes coated in mango jam, followed by a smoky potato rosti and sockeye salmon topped with a drizzle of crème fraîche, accented with pickled jalapeños. Next, we enjoyed a tender strip of beef loin with brussels sprouts and an earthy farro pilaf, before finishing with a



COURTESY: THE IVY WILD INN

Guests of The IvyWild Inn stay in a historic house built in the 1930s.

lemon-and-almond tart with a surface made dark and crunchy by brûléed sugar.

Each course was paired with wines from White Heron Cellars, a winery southeast of Wenatchee in the pending Ancient Lakes AVA, or American Viticultural Area. The rosé that was served as an aperitif was crisply dry with a lively finish of cherries and stone fruit, and the Rousanne that accompanied the salmon was surprisingly robust for a white wine, with a complex character that paired well with the spark of heat from the jalapeños.



COURTESY: ALPINE LAKES SHEEP CHEESE

Left: Alpine Lakes Creamery specializes in farmstead cheeses made from sheep's milk. Right: The creamery's flock of dairy sheep graze on a grassy meadow.

An innovative culinary spirit can also be found at Alpine Lakes Creamery, in the Cascade foothills west of Wenatchee. In a small, immaculate space on a hillside overlooking a pear orchard, Eric and Catha Link have been making remarkable cheeses for the past four years—mostly from the milk collected from the flock of sheep grazing among the pear trees. Catha says

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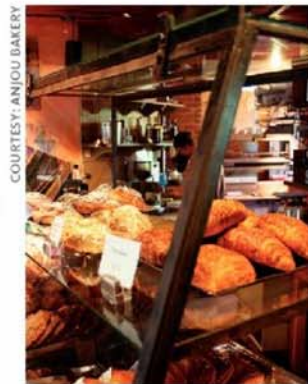
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that while they had few local customers when the couple first started out (most of their cheese has been sold to restaurants and markets in Seattle), the local demand for good food has increased to the point where they plan to market their cheeses almost exclusively in the surrounding region starting this summer.



COURTESY: ANJOU BAKERY  
Anjou Bakery, just west of Wenatchee, bakes delicious artisan breads and pastries.

“Four years ago, I served our Camembert and our hard cheese at a local event, and people wouldn’t try them—the idea of it being made from sheep’s milk was hard to get past,” Catha says. “Last year, I did it again at a harvest festival, and people weren’t only trying it—they were buying it.”

Alpine Lakes’ regular cheeses are a creamy, Camembert style and a wax-coated aged cheese with a crumbly texture and a nutty richness. The creamery also makes limited amounts of other cheeses, including a blue cheese; a style called Fogliano, rubbed with herbs and wrapped in a big maple leaf; and a goat cheese, made with goat milk from a nearby dairy. The Links are also finishing a small space at the back of their facility that will function as a climate-controlled cheese cave, making it possible to produce aged cheeses with a natural rind. To share their enthusiasm for cheese with neighbors and visitors, Catha conducts cheese-making classes every Saturday, from May through September.

A number of other local establishments are helping to broaden the valley’s food culture. For instance, Anjou Bakery, seven miles west of Wenatchee, offers artisan breads and pastries that may be enjoyed in the on-site cafe.

Another example is Caffè Mela, housed in a spacious downtown storefront on Wenatchee Avenue. Owner Darren Reynolds and his wife, Emily, moved to Wenatchee from Seattle in 2006 and

