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Do you enjoy fine wine? Sample the vintages at Magic Valley's wineries

Even wine-loving foodies might be surprised by south-central Idaho's winery expansions. All six Magic Valley wineries now have tasting rooms open to anyone, and their winemakers are hungry for a spot in your cellar.

So make a local tasting tour an all-day adventure: Choose a few wineries and a driver. Leave time to wander the vines or chat with the vintners. Ask for the stories behind the wineries' quirky labels. And come home with new wines to love.

That's what tasters who swirl a glass at Hegy's South Hills Vineyard and Winery are doing. "They're usually asking me how to get to the next one," owner Frank Hegy said.

Now is a perfect time to visit tasting rooms. Early summer is the first of two annual releases for Idaho wineries, so even people familiar with Idaho vintages can find something new. The Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission hasn't yet organized a wine tour in south-central Idaho, member Bill Ringert said, because the region has too few wineries, too far apart. "We'd love to see it," said Ringert, co-owner of Hammett's Cold Springs Winery.

But there's no need to wait for the commission. Magic Valley's wineries are arranged along the Snake River and linked by highways, and our story package today makes a personal tasting tour easy to plan.

A note on winery etiquette: If you taste everything and buy nothing, you'll leave a sour taste behind you. Chatting and serving in the tasting room consumes a lot of time for little return, said Dr. Paul Monahan, owner and winemaker at Hagerman's Thousand Springs Winery.

"It's a little discouraging," Monahan said. "It's a big black hole. There's so many wines out there; the competition, it's really very competitive." But Buhl winemaker James Holesinsky is more bullish on southern Idaho wines: "We're the new hottest area for tastings."

Cold Springs Winery

When to go: The tasting room is open year-round from noon to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, and at other times by appointment; 366-7993. Eight or 10 tasters is all Cold Springs can handle well without special arrangements, co-owner Bill Ringert said; call ahead if you want to bring more.

Ringert and his wife live on site, and winemaker Jamie Martin and the vineyard manager are often there, so you have a good chance of catching them for a tasting without an appointment.

Find it: Take exit 112 from Interstate 84 to reach 7853 W. Ringert Lane in Hammett; coldspringswinery.com. After a greeting by a friendly dog, you'll stand at the tasting room's granite-topped counter, surrounded by photographs of southern Idaho geology.

The room is pretty, but more like an office than anything else; on a warm day, you might opt for the sunflower-lined patio instead. The desert setting has Snake River Canyon rim rock on all sides, and expanses of sagebrush next to the 33 acres of vines.

What you'll pay: Tastings are free, except for large groups.

In your glass: Cold Springs' reds are merlot, syrah, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon, and this month Cold Springs released a new blend of cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot. (Tempranillo grapes are planted but not in production yet.) Whites are chardonnay, riesling, viognier and pinot gris.

Cold Springs' most popular is its Hot Rod Red blend of merlot, syrah and cabernet franc. Last summer Cold Springs rebranded all of its other wines with "-ology" suffixes, but Hot Rod Red kept its name. ("Don't kick a good horse in the teeth," Ringert explains.) Now Hot Rod Red is surrounded by names like Meteor/ology — that's a pinot gris whose label chatter links it to thunderstorms and global electrical circuits.

During a visit to the tasting room, you can sample at least five varieties, occasionally with crackers.

"During the middle of the week, it's limited to what we have open," Ringert said. "On Saturday and Sunday, we always anticipate that several groups will come through, so we pretty much pour tastings of the entire spread."

The experience: Take the 30-second walk from the tasting room into the winery operation and huge cellar to hear an explanation of the wine-making process. Here it's on a larger scale — and with more impressive equipment — than at many of south-central Idaho's other wineries.

Hegy's South Hills Vineyard and Winery

When to go: Hegy's offers tastings by appointment from early April until the end of October, then closes for the winter. Call 599-0074.

Find it: It's at 3099 E. 3400 N. among Twin Falls farm fields; that's exactly four miles south of Kimberly Road on Eastland Drive, on the southwest corner.

The backyard concrete winery has a small bar for tastings, and a pair of upholstered chairs. It's a friendly room — a little like your buddy's garage — and far from pretentious. You might find it cluttered with "cheap wine" kitsch and piles of cases. Don't bring along too many friends on cold days; there's room for about 10 inside the building at once.

What you'll pay: Tasting is free.

In your glass: For retail sale, Hegy's specializes in riesling, so there's just one wine to taste. And there's no food involved. But you'll get personal attention from Frank Hegy, the owner and winemaker.

This fall, he hopes to add a cabernet and a chardonnay, from other vineyards' grapes.

The experience: The 22-year-old operation is small but you can see it all, including the century-old, 2-ton Italian basket press. Hegy and his helpers do everything from an acre of vine cultivation — supplemented by purchased grapes and juice — through labeling, bottling and corking on site.

Thousand Springs Winery

When to go: Tastings are by appointment, year-round; 837-4557 or 420-2198, thousandspringswinery.com.

Find it: 18854 U.S. Highway 30 (that's halfway between mile markers 189 and 188) near Hagerman. You'll find the big tasting room and its distinctive spruce-wood bar inside the winery, amid two riverside acres of vines nourished by drip irrigation and fish emulsion fertilizer.

Once home to Black Angus, the winery is a converted barn, and its cooling unit is a former chicken coop. Now heavy timbers frame the entrance, and the tasting room is outfitted with antique doors, cabinets of local wood, classy metal fixtures, panels of art glass and Afghan rugs on a rough floor of stained concrete. The result is a destination that would be at home in anybody's wine country.

What you'll pay: Tastings are free for small groups, or \$5 per person for groups of 10 or more.

In your glass: Thousand Springs has four varietals hand bottled and corked on site, from its own hand-picked grapes and other local grapes: rose, chardonnay, syrah and merlot. Taste as many as you want. Almost always, visitors talk to Dr. Paul Monahan, owner and winemaker. No food here.

The experience: "If they're interested, we do a little tour of the winery and show them how everything works," Monahan said. Watch for Hungarian oak barrels, a pretty paver patio near a cattail-lined koi pond, an orchard and a backdrop of Snake River Canyon rock.

Snyder Winery

When to go: Summer tasting hours — June through September — are 1-9 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, and 1-5 p.m. on Sundays, or other times by appointment; 543-6938. (When the winery switches to winter hours in October, Sundays will drop out of the regular tasting schedule.)

You'll need appointments for wine-making tours and dinner reservations for the restaurant at Snyder Winery, formerly called Blue Rock. But you can just drop in for a wine tasting during restaurant hours — and order desserts or appetizers, if you like. The tasting room and grounds are spacious; bring as many friends as you want. "And spend the whole evening if you like," co-owner Russ Snyder said. The staff doesn't turn the tables during the course of an evening, so feel free to linger.

Find it: You'll find this unexpected little gem at 4060 N. 1200 E., in farm country west of Buhl. Restaurant tables on a window-enclosed deck surround a sophisticated tasting room, and you'll find more in the garden. The tasting room is outfitted with leather barrel chairs grouped around a piano and fireplace, on a rug-warmed floor of glowing wood.

What you'll pay: It's \$5 for three tastes of about an ounce each.

In your glass: Snyder Winery has eight wines to choose from, all made on site from its own or other Idaho grapes: riesling, chardonnay, white syrah, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah, cabernet franc and a Big Wood River Red blend of syrah, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc. Claudia Snyder is co-owner and co-winemaker with her husband; she or a restaurant server will handle the wine talk.

Pretzels and crackers are free, or you can order an hors d'oeuvre platter from the restaurant.

The experience: Start your visit during daylight, because this winery's grounds are gorgeous. Think fountains, bridges, benches, lamps, lawns, streams, stone walkways, pretty pots, lavish flower beds, a rose garden. The newest addition is a pavilion sheltering patio tables.

Holesinsky Organic Vineyard and Winery

When to go: Tastings are noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, and by appointment on other days; 543-6940 or 420-9887. Even on Saturday and Sunday afternoons it's a good idea to call first, in case the facility has been rented for a wedding reception, class reunion or the like. An appointment for tasting also ensures a one-on-one

experience with owner and winemaker James Holesinsky. The tasting room can accommodate about 10 people; there's outdoor seating for 50 in a garden overlooking the Snake River Canyon.

Find it: To reach 4477-A Valley Steppe Drive, north of Buhl, watch for the vineyard's big sign on Clear Lakes Road; holesinsky.com.

You'll find a low but welcoming building of stucco and brick studded with barrel ends. Inside is a sleek tasting room designed and lighted like a tiny art gallery. You'll stand at a bar of stained concrete. Outside, a weeping willow towers over a wooden deck, a fountain plays in a pond, and a stream intersects the rolling, boulder-strewn lawn.

What you'll pay: A \$5 tasting fee covers the first flight of five wines. Or pay \$20 per person for an experience that includes in-cellar barrel tasting, cheeses paired with individual wines and more attention from the winemaker.

In your glass: The first flight consists of Purple Octopus syrah, Fat Men merlot, Della's Ghost riesling, Vortex chardonnay and Pink Unicorn rose.

The \$20 tasting introduces a variety of private reserve wines. Holesinsky's single-barrel releases include a seven-varietal red blend, a tempranillo, a malbec "and some other surprises," he said. "That's our new thing — small-lot releases."

The experience: During a tasting, you can tour the newly built underground wine cellar and wander the canyon-rim site with its year-round waterfalls.

Novice home winemakers interested in learning about harvest can pay a consulting fee to come back in the fall for hands-on experience with Holesinsky.

Carmela Vineyards

When to go: Tastings are seven days a week, year-round: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays. Large groups are fine here.

Find it: 1289 W. Madison St. in Glens Ferry; carmelavineyards.com or 366-2313. You'll stand at the front counter inside a gift shop selling grape-themed T-shirts, candles in wine glasses, Oregon Trail memorabilia and the like.

What you'll pay: Five tastes of about an ounce each will cost \$5 if you don't buy a bottle of wine, but they're free if you do.

In your glass: Most of Carmela's wines are reds, but it lists some sweets and whites, too. Carmela makes all of its wines from Idaho grapes — both its own and grapes from small southern Idaho vineyards.

The newest release is Wine-A-Rita, Carmela's summer wine. It's a \$13.99 chardonnay blend that pairs well with chicken. "It has a little bit of a margarita flavor, and we're going to put it over ice with a bit of lime," bookkeeper Yvonne Decker said. For a tasting, you'll choose five wines from the list of 18 — staff recommends three reds, a white and sweet — and get crackers with your wine. An employee (perhaps manager Domonique Sykes) will handle the wine talk.

The experience: Behind the tree-lined entrance you'll find the most developed and tourist-friendly of south-central Idaho's wineries — and the least personal.

It's a wedding-worthy setting: Landscaped grounds and 30 acres of vineyards (labeled by variety) surround the winery on a slope overlooking the Snake River. A stone chateau houses a restaurant, bar and gift shop, with golf, cabins and an RV park also on the grounds.

If you want to tour the wine-making cellars, come between noon and 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, or make an appointment.