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BEST OF THE WEST

25 PERFECT WEEKEND HOTELS

P. 64

Pumpkin soup with pumpkin seed-mint pesto P. 89

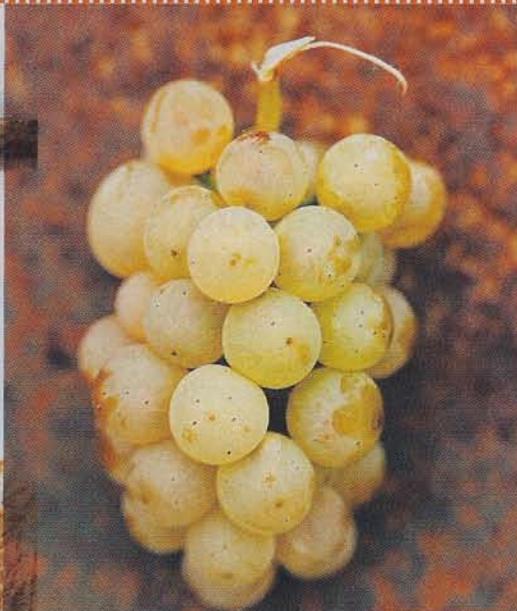
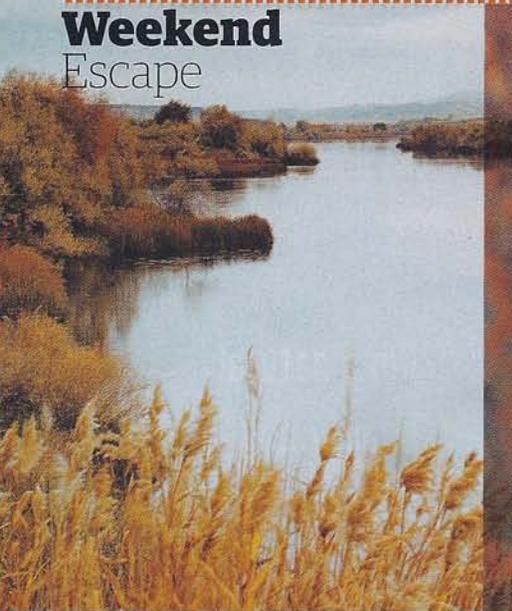
Bargain shopping for great new plants

PARTY TIME: autumn cider, gourmet caramel apples

OCTOBER 2011

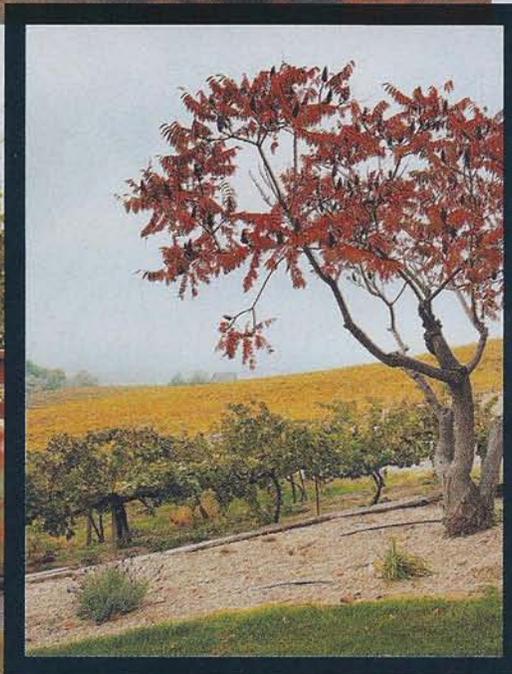
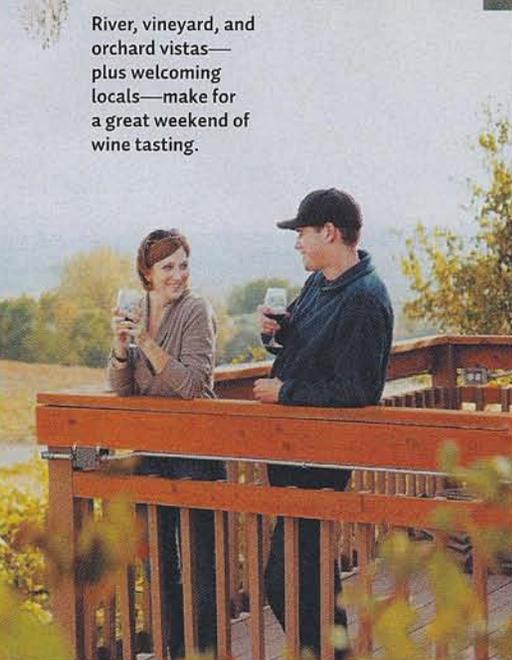
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Discover new wine country

River, vineyard, and orchard vistas—plus welcoming locals—make for a great weekend of wine tasting.



In Idaho's low-key Snake River Valley, the wine is getting seriously good

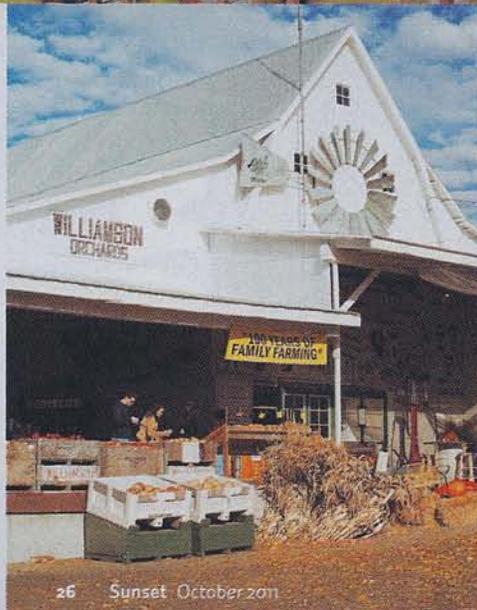
BY SARA SCHNEIDER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN CLARK

IF THERE'S GREAT WINE out there, I want to taste it. So I'm drawn to the Snake River Valley, having heard that a few key talents in this rich agricultural region are raising the bar on winemaking. But rolling west out of Boise, the mall sprawl feels less than reassuring, even as it transitions to a faded-gold October day in the high-desert countryside. Then I round a bend that opens over the broad valley and river proper, and there is what I'm looking for: lush, midharvest vineyards, a patchwork of green, yellow, and brown.

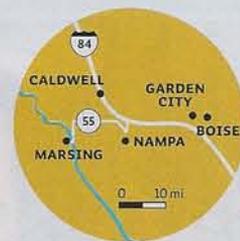
I pull up first to the farmstand at Williamson Orchards because, and this is telling, the area's mainstay ranching family has added "& Vineyards" to their name. Bright pumpkins and squash lounge in weathered bins around the outdoor market with the entitled air that descendants of generations of gourds on a 100-plus-year-old family farm deserve.

But the cute little tasting cottage behind still has its unweathered edges. It appears more newly minted, more self-conscious. I recognize the feeling that can temper my excitement whenever I poke around a new wine region that has "arrived": I expect I'll have to try to like these wines. >29





The Orchard House (left and below) serves three squares a day; Andy makes the vodkas at Koenig.



GETTING THERE

The Snake River Valley is about 45 minutes west of Boise.

48 HOURS IN WINE COUNTRY

SIP Bitner Vineyards (from \$5; 16645 Plum Rd., Caldwell; bitnervineyards.com) has tastings, plus lively weekend events. Head to the Bitners' Coyotes

Fine Wines on the Creek (217 S. Kimball Ave., Caldwell; 208/453-9463), a wine bar with at least one offering from every winery in Idaho. A leader in these parts, Melanie Krause makes wine in the urban industrial **Cinder Wines** (\$5; 107 E. 44th St., Garden City; cinderwines.com). Gina Davis offers great, tangy Tempranillo and more at **Davis Creek Cellars** (from \$5; 429 Main St., Marsing; daviscreekcellars.com).

Taste in the old barn at Gregg and Mary Alger's **Huston Vineyards** (free tastings; 16473 Chicken Dinner Rd., Caldwell; hustonvineyards.com). Find some of the region's best bottles at **Koenig Distillery & Winery** (free tastings; 20928 Grape Lane, Caldwell; koenigdistilleryandwinery.com).

Williamson Orchards & Vineyards has wine and fruit (19692 Williamson Lane, Caldwell; 208/459-7333). With many vintners pouring, Boise's **Capital City Public Market** (Sat through Dec 17; seeyouatthemarket.com) makes a one-stop shop.

EAT Chef Dustan Bristol's confit chicken and falling-off-the-bone lamb shanks hit the mark at **Brick 29 Bistro** (\$\$; 320 11th Ave. S., Nampa; 208/468-0029). The Swedish pancakes at the **Orchard House** (\$\$; 14949 Sunnyslope Rd., Caldwell; 208/459-8200) fortify ahead of a day of wine tasting.

Order a cocktail at the locavore **Red Feather Lounge** (\$\$; 246 N. Eighth St., Boise; 208/429-6340); be sure to ask to see the worm composters in the basement.

STAY Boise's **Hotel 43** (from \$139; hotel43.com) delivers midcentury suave with a sense of humor: You have to love a curtained jet tub in the middle of your room. For homey digs in the vineyard, reserve one of **Bitner's** two B&B rooms (\$169).

I confront my inner struggle with a Williamson Viognier, which turns out to be a beautifully balanced sip of a white, with the honeysuckle, stone fruit, and minerals spiked with citrus zest that make this wine irresistible when it's good. It's highly effective in softening lurking reservations.

Down the road, lunch at the low-slung Orchard House does the roadside diner tradition proud. Over home-baked goodies, Ron Bitner, a kindly bee-scientist turned vintner who has worked to pull the valley wine community together, shares a bottle of his brightly berried reserve Cab, which we chase with the diner's famed shakes. Ron admits that the short Idaho growing season makes ripening grapes a bit of a nail-biter. But otherwise the conditions have a lot in common with those of the Mediterranean, whose native grape varieties are starting to thrive here.

A decade ago, there were 11 wineries in Idaho; today there are 44. And those winemakers have put themselves through a virtual crash course, finding out through trial and error what grows well where, and how to craft the crop into stellar wines. There are some impressive bottles—I'm loving the Viogniers and Tempranillos—and a few that are still a bit rough. But that's the fun in visiting an emerging region with the potential to be great: You can come try to figure out what you think is

tasting best, and take it up with the winemakers, who often man tasting rooms themselves. Refreshingly, there are no walls up to manage the tourist flow.

I wind through orchards to Koenig winery, and the first thing I see is a gleaming copper-pot still. (It's not all about wine in this region yet.) Greg Koenig makes the wines, while freewheeling younger brother, Andy, tends the still. I can't leave with my bottle of "Cuvée Amelia" Reserve Syrah without tasting the huckleberry vodka. Admittedly, both offer up an awfully appealing taste of the place.

And so it goes through the weekend, on roads wending around fields, orchards, and vineyards, dipping into tasting rooms, each more down-to-earth than the last. Even the Snake is mellow, the current just right for rafting—but at a more leisurely float, a pace perfect, maybe, for sipping wine.