

# Travel: Taste of Two Idahos

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*Idaho's Snake River appellation.*

Never mind the potatoes. If wine industry forecasters are right, grapes are going to be Idaho's next famous crop. And right now, at the beginning of the story, is the best time to visit. To get a real taste of the possibilities, in the glass and in the field, split your trip between Boise and Caldwell, just a 30-minute drive from the capital city and the center of the Canyon County Wine Country. Idaho's not-yet-world-famous Snake River American Viticultural Area, or AVA, has great volcanic soil and the perfect weather to grow grapes: Warm-to-hot days that ripen the fruit to maximum sugar with cooling nights that keep the acids high. But from a visitor's point of view, a good part of the appeal is the vineyards' proximity to Boise, where local wine is served in boutique restaurants along with local food. In other words, it's easy to enjoy a taste of both worlds.

## THE COUNTRY

*The hillsides sloping down to the river with regular rows of vines. To one side is a grove of Oregon hazelnut trees inoculated with black truffles. The fields across the road are green with apple orchards. We're sitting on a trellised deck, taking in the view of distant mountains and sipping a glass of the local syrah.*

### The Sunnyslope Winegrowers

The hazelnut trees and the deck where we're sitting belong to Ron and Mary Bitner, who have been growing wine in Canyon County since 1981 (Bitner Vineyards, 16645 Plum Road, Caldwell, 208-455-1870, [bitnervineyards.com](http://bitnervineyards.com)).

They're the "old-timers" in Sunnyslope, the terroir where 90 percent of the Snake River AVA's fruit is grown. Ste. Chappelle is the local giant: It's been producing wine since the 1970s and made Idaho's reputation for reisling. Sunnyslope is the up and coming area. Bitner, a bee scientist who brought home a love for shiraz from a stint in Australia, is trying to raise awareness of this little piece of wine heaven. It's slow going Idaho growers'

hands-in-the-dirt style is just about the opposite of Napa's gentlemen farmers. But the outsiders are watching. Washington-based Precept just purchased Ste. Chappelle (19348 Lowell Rd., Caldwell Idaho, 208-453-7840, [stechappelle.com](http://stechappelle.com)).

They say wine grapes like to see the water, and the Snake River winds through its appellation, its banks lined with vine-planted slopes. Pick up a map and set aside a day to drive the Snake River Canyon Scenic Byway, visiting the Caldwell wineries and meeting the area wine farmers, who love to chat with visitors about their business.

Helen and Tim Harless gave up their jobs and moved to Idaho from Texas to start Hat Ranch winery (15343 Plum Road, Caldwell, 208-994-6416, [hatranchwinery.com](http://hatranchwinery.com)).

"I can live the way I want here," says Helen. "It's one of the most beautiful spots on earth." Following the path of Bitner, Huston Vineyards, Koenig and other neighbors, they are the advance guard of true believers in the potential greatness of Idaho wine. Caldwell is the center of Idaho's fruit-growing region, and roadside signs point out what is growing: 140 different crops. But the grape growers are now winegrowers.



*The Snake River Valley boasts several wineries including Huston Vineyards.*

### **Chicken Dinner Road**

Gregg and Mary Alger of Huston Vineyards (1647 Chicken Dinner Road, Caldwell, 208-455-7975, [hustonvineyards.com](http://hustonvineyards.com)) planted cabernet sauvignon, merlot and the emerging Idaho favorite, syrah. In 2008, they partnered with Melanie Krause, winemaker for her own Cinder Winery. Prudently focusing on a pair of all-purpose low-priced wines, Chicken Dinner Red and Chicken Dinner White, the Alger's were pleasantly surprised when their \$40 Private Reserve 2010 Red quickly sold out.



*St. Chapelle, one of Idaho's oldest wineries, offers educational tours.*

### Stay Among the Vines

The Best Western Plus Caldwell Inn & Suites (908 Specht Ave., Caldwell, 866-257-5990, [bestwestern.com](http://bestwestern.com)) is the main hotel in Caldwell, but a number of wineries, including Bitner and Hat Ranch, run on-premise bed and breakfasts. But you'll likely eat breakfast at Orchard House (14949 Sunny Slope Road, Caldwell, 208-459-8200, [theorchardhouse.us](http://theorchardhouse.us)), a riverside Western-style cafe where Hoss and Little Joe would feel right at home. Have a cinnamon roll and a cup of coffee. Stick around, and you'll probably meet most of Sunnyslope's winegrowers and farmers.

### THE CITY

*Boise is a small city with big energy. It's been reinvented by young people who are excited about the town's future and who have created a city center that is cutting edge in the kindest way: pedestrian and bicycle friendly. The Boise River invites tubers, rafters and kayakers as soon as the sun shines, and the riverside parks are full of picnickers, golfers and strollers. And then, there's the wine and food.*

### The 44th Street Visionaries

Close to downtown Boise, though technically in Garden City, is the 44th Street Wine Collective (107 1/2 E. 44th St., Garden City), an old warehouse home to three young wineries. Melanie Krause and Joe Schnerr own Cinder Wines ([cinderwines.com](http://cinderwines.com)); Leslie Preston is proprietor and winemaker at Coiled ([coiledwines.com](http://coiledwines.com)) and Earl and Carrie Sullivan own Telaya ([telayawine.com](http://telayawine.com)).

Each team bottles their own wine while sharing equipment, know-how, excitement and disappointment. They call it a "capitalist collective." A fourth tenant, Wine Wise Idaho ([winewiseidaho.com](http://winewiseidaho.com)), does wine analysis as well as wine education and consultation, so wines can be tested at any point. Krause and Schnerr own the warehouse, a custom crush business and the anchor winery, Cinder—named for the unique volcanic soil that gives Idaho's AVA its unique terroir. While it's definitely a dream to own land and grow their own grapes, right now all these wineries buy fruit from Snake Valley vineyards. More and more they work with the growers to get the kind of fruit they need. These young winemakers have worked in California, Oregon, Washington and

other wine centers. What brought them to Idaho? “Experienced people are coming here. There’s a depth of knowledge, and there’s a base level of quality,” says Kathryn House, proprietor of Wine Wise. “There’s a preconceived notion of Idaho wine, so consumer education is really important. This is the ‘aha’ moment in Idaho wine.” All these wineries depend on the other Idaho wineries to succeed.



*Boise's downtown Farmer's Market*

### **Home-owned Hotels**

The Grove Hotel (245 S. Capitol Blvd., 208-333-8000, [grovehotelboise.com](http://grovehotelboise.com)) is right in the middle of downtown, close to Jack’s Place, an innovative urban meeting place being constructed near the convention center. It will include an amphitheater, a park and public art, music and kitchen studios. The Riverside Hotel (2900 W. Chinden Blvd., 208-343-1871, [riversideboise.com](http://riversideboise.com)) and Hotel 43 (981 W. Grove St., 208-342-4622) are both former chain hotel properties that have been bought and rethought by private individuals. The pet-friendly Riverside Hotel, formerly a Doubletree, isn’t downtown but is adjacent to the Boise River and the bike-friendly, 26-mile greenbelt. (The hotel can provide a cycle for your visit.) The Snake Bar serves Snake River kobe beef burgers by the pool and is home to a hot music scene in summer months. The kitchen serves up an all-Idaho breakfast featuring baked spuds filled with a cheesy scramble, Snake River sausage, bacon from Twin Falls hogs and homemade cake doughnuts. Hotel 43 (981 Grove St., 800-243-4622, [hotel43.com](http://hotel43.com)) is a cool mid-century styled property in easy walking distance of the heart of downtown Boise and houses one of the town’s top steakhouses, Chandlers.



*On Boise's historical "Basque Block," The Basque Market serves paella on the patio.*

### **Eat Here Now**

Boise's young food scene is hot to promote Idaho foodstuffs and please, no potato jokes.

Many downtown restaurants serve Idaho wines, notably sister restaurants Bittercreek Alehouse and Red Feather Lounge (246 N. 8th St., 208-429-6340, [bcrfl.com](http://bcrfl.com)). At Red Feather's cocktail hour we ordered different wines and small plates. Down the street, an old bank building has been reborn as a charming restaurant Fork (199 N. 8th St., 208-287-1700, [boisefork.com](http://boisefork.com)), which also follows the farm-to-fork philosophy drawing ingredients from all over the Northwest.