

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

TRAVEL AGE WEST

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**A LOOK INTO
KONINGSDAM'S
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**THE MAGIC OF
GRAND VELAS
LOS CABOS**

**A LUXURIOUS
STAY IN OREGON'S
WILLAMETTE VALLEY**

ON-SITE REVIEW

A Spirited Stay

Flowing with soul and wine, The Allison Inn & Spa is a top luxury option in the Willamette Valley

Mindy Poder

There are more than 500 wineries and 700 vineyards in Oregon's Willamette Valley, a 150-mile-long, 60-mile-wide area bordered by the Cascade Range to the north, the Coast Range to the west and the Calapooya Mountains to the south.

With such a vast and perpetually growing number of wine slingers to sift through, travelers attempting to map out a tasting itinerary before their trip might struggle with selecting the right wineries to visit.

And it doesn't help matters that many of Willamette's wineries only accept visitors with advance reservations.

What my partner and I needed was someone — or something — imbedded in the scene to match us to the right pinot noir purveyor.

Fortunately, soon after our scenic one-hour drive from Portland International Airport, we met with Pierre Zreik, managing director for The Allison Inn & Spa in Newberg, Ore., one of the key towns in the valley's wine region.

With the exceptions of the fitness center's new machines, the guestrooms' new mattresses and the property's LEED Gold Certification, Zreik's explanations typically related to wine and the hotel's owners.

"The Allison was supposed to be 40 rooms, but the local winemakers wanted more," said Zreik, alluding to the fact that the 85-room Allison is the only luxury property located so close to the region's vineyards. "Joan [Austin, the hotel's late founder] told us: 'Don't cut corners.' No one in their wildest dreams thought they would have this."

Indeed, The Allison's subtle take on luxury has helped elevate the wine region's reputation without making it feel too much "like Napa," a comparison that's considered something of an insult around these parts.

But the inn is also significant to the area for its democracy. Each Thursday, the hotel's Living Room hosts a Willamette winemaker for a tasting. Ever the fair platform for the region's wine, The Allison permits each winemaker to hold a tasting only once per year.

Through its relationships with the area's wine-makers, The Allison's concierge offers the unique service of listening to guests' wine preferences and then scheduling winery visits, including to exclusive rooms not open to the public.

We got our first taste of The Allison's insider cache not from the concierge, but from Zreik. While



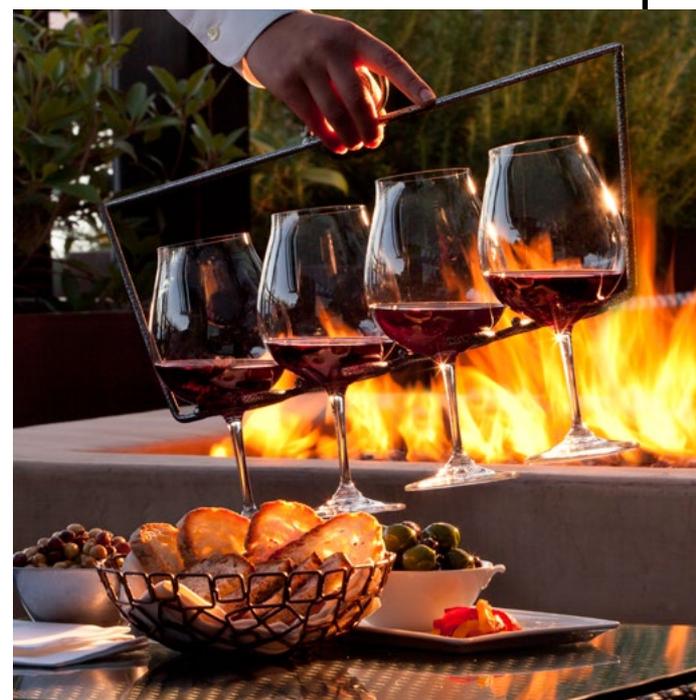
giving us a tour of the hotel's farm-to-table restaurant, Jory, he pointed to a bottle of Sequitur — a new addition to the 800 labels on the restaurant's epic wine list — and said we had to try it at some point of our stay. Over dinner that night at Jory, our server made two glasses of this pinot noir appear, without being asked. The wine was also the perfect warming complement to the hearty, nostalgic and seasonal fare served by executive chef Sunny Jin and his team.

Jin, who completed his externship at The French Laundry in Napa Valley and spent a season at El Bulli in Spain, sources as many ingredients as possible from the property's greenhouse and gardens — something I could taste in my butternut squash soup and vegetable gratin.

"We're constantly expanding," Jin said. "There are gardens everywhere. Tucked away are figs, quince, persimmons, apples and pears."

It's easy to vouch for the number of fresh ingredients used when eating at the counter of the open-air kitchen or while dining at the 10-person Chef's Table (where patrons enjoy a custom-made chef's menu). And it's also educational: Because of our counter-side meals, my partner claims he can now properly peel a Brussels sprout and flawlessly poach an egg.

Even the products for the spa's signature



"Pinotherapy" treatments are sourced from The Allison vineyard's own grapeseed. According to spa director Tara Carlton, the property's winemaker, Adelsheim Vineyards, dries out the seeds and then ships them to a Santa Barbara grapeseed company that makes the spa's polyphenol-rich products,



Art from the founding family's collection can be spotted throughout the 35-acre hotel.



Most ingredients used at Jory are sourced on-site or from local purveyors.

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Jory's wine list was recognized by Wine Spectator with a "Best of Award of Excellence."



Guestroom amenities include a fireplace, a bay window and a balcony.

which are then used for wraps and scrubs.

This attention to detail is what makes the 12-treatment-room spa one of the best on the West Coast. The spa beds here are better than usual, with functionality to elevate feet and even the upper body at the end of the treatment. The mattresses

are perfectly cushioned; the sheets have the right heft; the music and temperature are adjustable; and there's even a heating panel for robes.

Before signing out, spa guests receive a freshly made, seasonal chocolate truffle. (Use your charm, and you might get two.) Treats, like wine, are the

glue that binds here.

Upon entering my guestroom, for instance, I spotted a plate of chocolate-dipped graham crackers topped with a dollop of whipped marshmallow — an elevated s'more. Every room also comes with a basket of Oregon-made goodies such as chocolate-covered hazelnuts, potato chips and health bars.

And expect beloved luxury guestroom amenities, such as flat-screen televisions and massive bathrooms with his-and-hers sinks.

But what makes the rooms most memorable are the homey features seemingly designed to complement in-room wine tasting, such as a gas fireplace, a soaking tub, a balcony and a bay window seat.

Adding to the dream-home-away-from-home feel are the room sizes (ranging from generous to huge at 490 to 1,575 square feet) and the bespoke artwork, handpicked by Loni Parrish, Joan Austin's daughter and a local artist and gallerist.

It's just one of the touches that ensures guests don't feel like they're in a corner-cutting, cookie-cutter hotel.

"We hope guests feel how special the hotel is when they walk in," Carlton said. "We just want to make Joan proud." ●

The Details: *The Allison Inn & Spa* (www.theallison.com)