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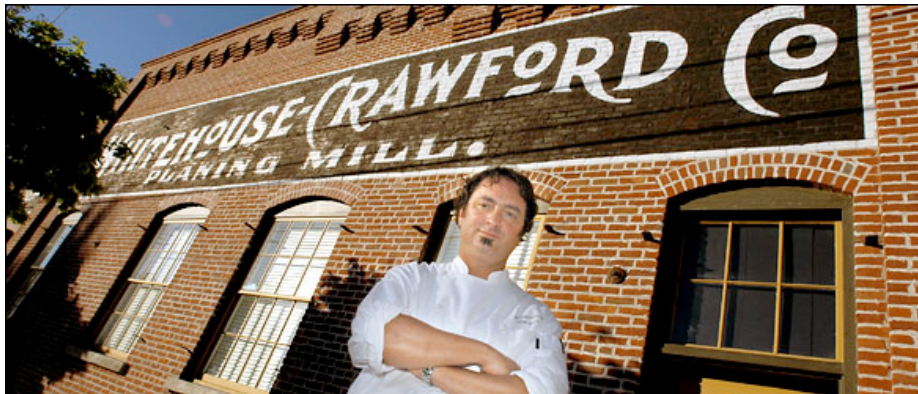
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The Tastes of Walla Walla, Secret No More



Greg Lehman for The New York Times

Old-fashioned charm: Jamie Guerin, a chef in Walla Walla, Wash.

By [R. W. APPLE Jr.](#)
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WALLA WALLA, Wash.

THE landscape that unfolds beneath the little plane as it wends its way east from Seattle is not very welcoming. First come the daunting peaks of the Cascade Range, and then a sparsely populated near-desert. Eventually, it lets down over a series of vast sand dunes that are cloaked during spring and early summer in an emerald-green mantle of winter wheat. Soon the small, ordered city of Walla Walla ("many waters," in the language of the Cayuse Indians) comes into view.

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Walla Walla is as improbable as its name. It is a remote yet worldly community of 30,000, famous for sweet onions and more recently for world-class merlot and cabernet sauvignon, near the place where Washington, Oregon and Idaho meet. "The town so nice they named it twice," the Chamber of Commerce rather cloyingly calls it.

It reminded me of St. Helena in the Napa Valley 35 years ago, when that town was just emerging as a wine capital, before it was overrun by Silicon Valley zillionaires and tourists on excursions from San Francisco. It seems safe from that fate; the nearest big city, Spokane, 125 miles away, is short of both tourists and zillionaires.

Like all wine areas, Walla Walla flourishes because of its

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Greg Lehman for The New York Times

The Abeja winery

soils and its climate. The valley once lay under 1,200 feet of water, impounded by a sheet of ice. When the water was released by the melting ice, it left behind a layer of unusually deep, well-drained silt, known as loess. Temperatures are ideal for wine grapes: extremely hot days in summer, nights as much as 25 to 40 degrees cooler.

Two Army Reserve chums, Gary Figgins and Rick Small, put Walla Walla wines on the map. A burly, unpretentious man who likes to laugh, Mr. Figgins started as an amateur winemaker, inspired by holiday visits to California

vineyards. He founded Leonetti Cellar in 1977 - naming it for his maternal grandparents, who immigrated from Italy - and produced its first wines the next year. A quarter-century later, Leonetti has attained cult status, its name whispered from one aficionado to another.

Even in Seattle, Leonetti is relatively rare in restaurant wine cellars, and it isn't cheap. At Wild Ginger, Rick Yoder's bustling pan-Asian brasserie there, where markups are relatively modest, the 1999 Leonetti cabernet lists for \$144 a bottle, and the 2000 vintage will set you back \$152.

So what makes Leonetti special? Mr. Figgins opens his cellar to the public only once a year, and then only to those on his mailing list, some of whom come from as far away as Atlanta to pick up their allocations. When he made an exception for me, several things became immediately clear.

More than any other producer I have visited, he emphasizes cleanliness in the winery, believing that even a few germs can spoil a wine. Most winemakers draw wine for tasting from a barrel with a device called a pipette, fill glasses, taste and put what's left back into the barrel. Not Mr. Figgins. He throws away the leftovers.

He uses unusual quantities (17 percent in 2002) of one of the "minor" Bordeaux grapes, petit verdot, along with cabernet and merlot, to add depth to his coveted reserve wine. And he uses barrels of several sizes and ages to control oakiness.

"But it's really all about biological management," he insisted. "Throwing away all those chemicals. The world has to change, and here we already have."

In a pair of tanks, Mr. Figgins brews what he calls earth tea. In goes compost and out comes a liquid for drip irrigation that, he says, "will make anything grow" - vines, lilacs, trees like the oaks and aspens he has planted all over his property. A new Leonetti vineyard, planted on hard, inadequately friable, poorly drained land that had been conventionally farmed, sprang back to life after a few gulps of earth tea.

Mr. Figgins started in a tiny building the size of a one-car garage, which makes him the literal American equivalent, I suppose, of the small-scale "garagistes" of Bordeaux. He dedicated a sparkling new winery in 2000, but still produces only about 6,200 cases a year - "slightly more than Pétrus," he joked.

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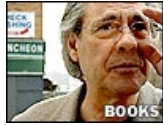
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