



Locavore's Eden

The Walla Walla Valley is home to cheesemaker Pierre-Louis Monteillet's fromagerie (left), Klicker's strawberry fields (above), and the Edwards Family fruit and produce farm (right).

Walla Walla Beyond Wine

The best harvest in town isn't made of grapes.

By David Laskin

YOU SWIRL A BALLOON OF cabernet in a plush tasting room done up in Persian rugs and cowboy wrought iron. You notice, through the light vinous haze, how the wheat fields shoulder into the Blue Mountains with the heft and shimmer of a Georgia O'Keeffe landscape. The heirloom tomato and artisanal mozzarella Caprese you order for lunch is the best you've ever tasted; the viognier you're washing it down with is worth every cent. By the time you've killed the bottle, you're thinking about plunking down for a second night in the cheerless downtown chain motel you found on TripAdvisor. Then you throw back a double macchiato and decide you better push on after all.

I've had some version of this experience in Walla Walla many times. But it

was only when I finally gave in to that extra day that I came to appreciate the true bounty of the valley.

First wheat, then wine put Walla Walla on the map—but these days niche agriculture is turning the town and the surrounding valley into a locavore's Eden. The soils that yield some of the finest (and priciest) wines in the state also sustain superb produce, fruit, and pasture-raised livestock. Walla Walla chefs have begun locally sourcing everything from cheese to strawberries to greens to beef and lamb—or growing their own ingredients in little plots at the edges of vineyards.

"Terroir—the taste of the land—factors into cheese as well as wine," says Joan Monteillet of Monteillet Fromagerie. "Pairing food and wine is much more interesting than just wine tast-

ing—and you're much more sober afterwards."

With a population of 32,000, a state-ly redbrick downtown, and two well-regarded colleges, Walla Walla is a small town that feels like a small city. But its heart and soul have always been in the deep rich loess (drifts of rock dust) outside of town—perhaps never more so than today when farmers and chefs are discovering how much they have in common.

As Dan Thiessen, a chef who left Seattle to run the culinary arts program at the Wine Country Culinary Institute, puts it, "There's something to be said for driving down the road and waving at the farmer who grew the onions you're cooking with. There are some roots to that."

You can practically sink your fingers into those roots at Edwards Family Farm in Milton-Freewater, just over the Oregon border. Vienna-born Ilse Edwards, who sells the fruit and produce that her husband Ron grows on the 20 acres he inherited from his father (and grandfather before him), hands you scissors and sends you out to cut your own chard. "These hoop house tomatoes are ugly," she confides in her musically accented English, "but they're delicious." She's right—Ilse is always right. Her apricots are delicious; so are the cherries, the corn, the peaches, the squash.

If you don't have access to a kitchen, you can sample what creative local chefs do with Ilse and Ron's harvest at a number of downtown Walla Walla restaurants, including the eminently lunchable Brasserie Four. "We do comfort French food—sourced as locally as possible," says Hannah MacDonald, the chef-owner who grew up in Walla Walla but learned to cook in Paris and Portland. MacDonald fills her summer crepes with velvety compote made from Edwards farm's apricots and garnishes salads (sourced exclusively from Morning Mist Nursery, another local grower) with its apples and pears.

Grab an espresso at the Coffee Connection Cafe on Main Street, because you are going to take a drive—a gorgeous, delicious drive—after lunch. But first, make a pit stop in the dusty, industrial east end of town at Klicker's Antique and Fruit Store. Don't be put off by the combination of edibles and collectibles—it's worth wading through all manner of knickknacks to get at Klicker's strawberries, picked ripe and sold both whole or sliced in a bucket, and usually available through the first week of August.

The drive from Walla Walla to Monteillet Fromagerie takes you through quintessential Palouse landscape—25 miles of billowing wheat planted on pillows of loess. Joan Monteillet's family grew wheat on these hills for three generations, but 13 years ago she and her French-born husband Pierre-Louis traded agro-biz monoculture for diversified niche farming. They bought 32 bucolic acres on the Touchet River near the tiny town of Dayton and pastured small herds of French Alpine goats and Lacune sheep. They started making limited batches of gourmet cheeses. Then they added an organic vegetable garden and sold the produce on the farm and at farmers markets around the region. They opened a cheese tasting room and began offering cheesemaking workshops and cooking demonstrations. Today Monteillet Fromagerie is a pilgrimage stop on the agro-tourism circuit.

Though best known for their huge array of artisanal cheeses (larzac, a soft-ripened morbier-style cheese layered with grape-leaf ash and sea salt, is among the most popular; wasabi and pickled ginger chevre one of the more unusual), the Monteillets have a hand in just about every food group, including lavender honey, exotic greens, poultry, and whey-fed pork.

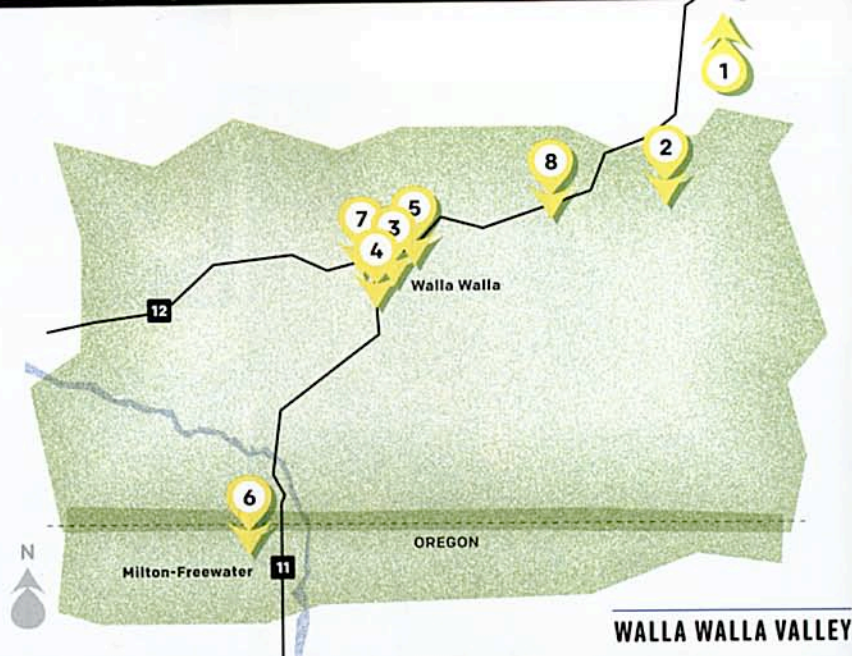
"Being married to a Frenchman has really changed my way of thinking about

food," Joan says as she surveys their tiny, burgeoning empire. "What it's really about is honest food—something that we in the States really need to learn about."

If you can't tear yourself away from the Monteillets' agricultural sublime, you can stay over in their *gîte*, a lovely farmhouse they have done up as a rental property. The only downside is you may not have the steam to drive back into Walla Walla for dinner at one of the superb local restaurants (Saffron, T. Maccaroni's, Whitehouse Crawford) and a performance at the Gesa Power House Theater that Seattle transplant Harry

Hosey pioneered at the edge of downtown two years ago.

Hosey, who ran an engineering firm in Edmonds, is a cautionary tale about what can happen in Walla Walla. First he fell in love with the wine, then he fell for the town and its people, then he bought some land and built a house, and, the next thing he knew, he and his partners had sunk almost \$3 million (and counting) into converting a 120-year-old power plant into a regional center for the performing arts. Be careful as you surrender to the bounty of summer in this seductive little place. ♦



Stay, Eat, Do

STAY

- 1 The Gite at Monteillet Fromagerie**
The cheesemaker's airy three-bedroom vacation home has a full kitchen, sunny deck, and picking privileges at the farm's vegetable garden—you could assemble a complete meal from what the Monteillets grow, raise, and sell. 109 Ward Rd, Dayton, 509-382-1917; monteilletcheese.com

- 2 The Inn at Abeja**
An historic farm-turned-premier winery offers a range of luxury accommodations in beautifully restored outbuildings—chicken coop, summer kitchen, loft—surrounded by lawns and flower gardens. 2014 Mill Creek Rd, Walla Walla, 509-522-1234; abeja.net/inn

EAT

- 3 Brasserie Four**
Moules frites, escargot, crepes—this is about as close as you can get to an authentic Parisian brasserie east of the Cascades. 4 E Main St, Walla Walla, 509-529-2011; brasseriefour.com

- 4 Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen**
Chef-owner Chris Ainsworth combines the best of Spanish, Italian, and Turkish cuisine while sourcing most of the ingredients locally. The results are exquisite—and the ambience serene. 125 W Alder St, 509-525-2112; saffronmediterraneankitchen.com

- 5 T. Maccaroni's**
The sleek modern interior contrasts nicely with rich, creative Italian cuisine, with dishes like roasted beet salad, tagliatelle with homemade sausage, and cider-braised pork shank. 4 N Colville St, Walla Walla, 509-522-4776; tmaccarones.com

DO

- 6 Edwards Family Farm**
Ron and Ilse Edwards, practicing the opposite of monoculture, grow and sell a huge variety of fruits and vegetables; high summer highlights include apricots, peaches, cherries, and chard. 85124 Highway 339, Milton Freewater, Oregon, 541-938-5933

- 7 Gesa Power House Theater**
Summer programming at downtown Walla Walla's new, and instantly popular, performing arts venue includes a comedy series and Shakespeare festival. 111 N Sixth Ave, Walla Walla, 509-529-6500; phtww.com

- 8 Klicker's Antique and Fruit Store**
Hands down, the Klickers grow the best strawberries in the valley with an extra-long season due to the varied elevations of their plantings. 3300 E Isaacs Ave, Walla Walla, 509-525-8650; klickerstrawberry.com