

Vancouver waterfront wine tasting room and restaurant offers welcoming vibe

By for The Columbian

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The outdoor patio at Willamette Valley Vineyards Tasting Room & Restaurant overlooks the Columbia River.
(Rachel Pinsky)

Willamette Valley Vineyards founder Jim Bernau began making pinot noir in the Willamette Valley in 1983, a year before the federal government established it as Oregon's first viticultural area. The vineyards' tasting room and restaurant opened at The Waterfront Vancouver in August 2022. Based on my recent visit, I would recommend it to anyone seeking good food and wine in an elegant setting.

I met a friend there around 5:30 p.m. on a weeknight. When I arrived, the hostess asked if we would like to sit inside or outside. Warmth from crackling fireplaces filled the interior. But on this night, the blush of the setting sun beckoned us to the outdoor patio overlooking the Columbia River.

My dining companion and I were discussing how good it felt to be outside on this warm August night when our server appeared with wine glasses filled with a splash of a crisp 2022 Grüner Veltliner from the Eola-Amity Hills. In addition to wine, the restaurant's cocktail list includes a blackberry gin and tonic (\$14) and a lavender paloma (\$14), as well as draft beer (\$6) and nonalcoholic beverages like sparkling water, coffee (\$3) and tea (\$3).

We ordered a variety of dishes from the menu, which offers share plates, starters, dinner and dessert. My friend had sampled the Roasted Sunchokes With Mint Tahini starter (\$11) before and recommended it. Chef DJ MacIntyre started making this dish at home, fell in love with it, and added it to Willamette Valley Vineyards' restaurants. His recipe works well with all types of root vegetables. Since sunchokes aren't in season right now, the dish was made with fennel bulb and celeriac root. This vegan starter mixes tender slices of root vegetables dusted with chili flakes with a luscious mint tahini sauce.

Next came the Whipped Feta With Honey & Pistachios (\$10) and the Pacific White Shrimp with garlic, habanero, lemon, white wine, and grilled baguette (\$18). The whipped sheep's milk feta and Greek yogurt comes with a zigzag of honey and a sprinkle of pistachios — a nice mix of sweet, salty and creamy.

For the shrimp dish, a twirl of angle-sliced toasted baguette from Ken's Artisan Bakery covered a tangle of plump Kauai white shrimp. They were bathed in a mix of garlic, Secret Aardvark habanero hot sauce, lemon and white wine. This light but luscious wine-friendly starter arrived with enough shrimp to make a main course for one.

I sipped a glass of the 2021 Tualatin Estate White Pinot Noir (\$18) with these first few dishes. The juice for this wine is aged in stainless-steel tanks and neutral French oak giving it clean bright aromas and flavors with just a touch of creaminess.

My friend can't eat gluten, so she asked our server for an alternative to the bread for scooping up the array of dips and sauces that filled our table. Our server returned with two razor-thin housemade chickpea crackers with big flakes of sea salt (\$2). Willamette Valley Vineyards offers several different versions of these crackers at various locations. They're rolled out, dotted with a variety of spices, herbs, or nuts, and baked. They were delicious, but I didn't realize there would be an extra charge for them. The server didn't mention this extra fee and I didn't see it on the menu. Also, two thin crackers seemed stingy given all the food on the table. I think the restaurant should have either offered the crackers as a complimentary alternative to bread or mentioned the extra charge.

For entrees, I had the Ancho Chili Grilled Halibut (\$36) and my friend had the Savory Herb Roasted Chicken (\$28).

The halibut, a seasonal menu item, comes with roasted corn mashed potatoes and a fresh salsa made from tomatoes, tomatillos and avocado. Dried chili and garlic oil douse the hearty, tender fish, which is grilled with hardwood. I ordered the suggested pairing, a 2019 Griffin Creek Cabernet Franc (\$18), a lush, jammy wine with light tannins that indeed complemented the halibut dish.

The roasted chicken is marinated in garlic-and-herb brine for 12 hours. The chicken was a well-seasoned, tender, juicy haunch with a bit of crisp skin. It arrived atop a bed of roasted baby potatoes in a velvety cream sauce laced with sun-dried tomatoes. Dots of chevre and a sun-dried tomato jam covered the meat.

At the end of a lovely and filling evening, neither of us had room to try the Caramelized Banana Cheesecake (gluten-free and vegetarian, \$14) or ice cream and sorbet (\$6) on the dessert menu.

Willamette Valley Vineyards Chef DJ MacIntyre previously worked as chef de cuisine at Seastar Restaurant and Raw Bar in Bellevue. The smattering of his dishes that we tried tasted fresh, offered the right mix of flavor and textures and paired well with wine.

Spaces that focus on wine can sometimes feel uncomfortably snooty. Willamette Valley Vineyards Vancouver Tasting Room & Restaurant gives visitors a high-end experience but with kind, attentive service and a welcoming vibe. I like that the menu is set up so that a group of friends or a couple can stop by for a glass of wine and a starter or customers celebrating a special occasion can splurge.

Charging for two gluten-free crackers without mentioning the cost to the customer was the only sour note. This small misstep didn't overshadow the sunset view or the stellar food, drink and service.



Whipped Feta with Honey & Pistachios (Rachel Pinsky)



Roasted Sunchokes with Mint Tahini (rachel Pinsky)



Shrimp with garlic, habanero, lemon and white wine (Rachel Pinsky)



Gluten-free chickpea crackers at Willamette Valley Vineyards Tasting Room & Restaurant. (Rachel Pinsky)



2021 Tualatin Estate White Pinot Noir at Willamette Valley Vineyards Tasting Room & Restaurant. (Rachel Pinsky)



Herb Roasted Chicken in a chevre and sun-dried tomato cream sauce (Rachel Pinsky)



Ancho Chili Grilled Halibut (Rachel Pinsky)



2019 Griffin Creek Cabernet Franc (Rachel Pinsky)



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