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A GROUND-BREAKING WINE REGION: LEWIS-CLARK VALLEY

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WILLAMETTE VALLEY, COLUMBIA VALLEY, WALLA WALLA Valley, Snake River Valley and Lewis-Clark Valley. If you enjoy Northwest wine, you are probably aware of those first four valleys—each one a wine region that has come into their own and is now recognized and respected by connoisseurs worldwide. And, whether you know it yet, that last valley on that list is poised to join them.

In 2016, the Lewis-Clark Valley (lewisclarkwine.com) became an official AVA (American Viticultural Area). At last count, there are 16 vineyards and 9 wineries producing more than 20 varietals, including petit verdot, sangiovese, syrah, sauvignon blanc and viognier. Roughly 70 percent of the new 306,659-acre appellation resides in Idaho with its western and southern tendrils extending into Washington. And while it is the most recently recognized AVA in the region, it's roots run deep.

In 1872, French native Robert Schleicher arrived in Lewiston. Renowned for his winemaking expertise, in 1905 he proclaimed, "My candid opinion is that this is the best place in the United States for grape growing... There is no reason why it should not be the leading industry here." He was certainly onto something, and others agreed.

As Idaho's "Banana Belt," the Lewis-Clark Valley is home to a temperate climate flanked by colder regions. Steep, V-shaped valleys and high plateaus help facilitate air flow, drainage and provide protection from the cold. The mollisols soil, produced by decomposed grassland, possesses a high capacity for holding water and is bolstered by loess—a wind-deposited nutrient-rich silt. By 1908, more than 40 varietals of wine grapes were being cultivated. However, in 1910, just as the industry began to flourish, the city of Lewiston banned the sale of alcohol, and the state of Idaho soon followed. Four years later, Prohibition would be enacted nationally. New industries took hold, and winemaking in the area was all but forgotten.

Thankfully, the emergence of wine from Oregon and Washington led to a resurgence of viticulture in Idaho. It's been a slow, sustained rebuild, but thanks to hard work, foresight and the newly anointed AVA, the Lewis-Clark Valley is prepared for launch. When you visit, there's already plenty to see—and taste—with much more in the works.

A great place to start is on the Washington side of the Snake River in Clarkston, at Basalt Cellars (basaltcellars.com). Featuring a lineup of award-winning wines from their own estate vineyards as well as varietals produced from the neighboring Columbia Valley AVA, a tasting there is the perfect way to get a feel for the entire region before diving deeper into the Lewis-Clark Valley. The locally sourced 2016 Sauvignon Blanc and the 2012 Malbec are standouts.

For a full immersion and the added benefit of a designated driver, take a tour with Twisted Vine Wine Tours (twistedvinewt.com). The extremely professional, engaging, and informative outings provide an in-depth understanding of the history, wine and people that are helping to plot the new AVA's course. One highlight is Vine 46 (vine46.com), where you're almost guaranteed to make new friends over a glass of their 2015 Syrah. At Clearwater Canyon Cellars (clearwatercanyoncellars.com), you'll reap the benefits of what education and talent have sewn. Between them, winemakers Coco and Karl possess an entire wall's worth of degrees, including undergraduates in chemistry and microbiology, a Masters in Soils, and a Ph.D. in Food Science. They tend the vines on family land that also happens to be an Idaho century farm. This is a place that perfectly represents what the Lewis-Clark AVA is—winemaking legacy, science and soil that are truly unique.

To learn more about the wineries in the Lewis-Clark Valley, visit lewisclarkwine.com. To plan a getaway to the region, go to visitlcvalley.com. 🍷

