TWO decades ago, Doug Tunnell was a veteran newsman who wanted to be a winemaker. Having been a globetrotting CBS correspondent for 18 years, he bought a farm and returned to his family’s roots in the Willamette Valley, a landscape of rolling hills and farmland about 45 minutes southwest of Portland, Oregon.

But he didn’t just want to make wine — he wanted to make organic wine.

“Back in the day, no one else was doing organic, other than the Cattrall Brothers Vineyard down the valley in Amity,” Mr. Tunnell said. He bushwhacked his way through his 40-acre parcel, a former hazelnut farm scarred by years of pesticide use, and employed natural remedies to rehabilitate the soil and keep his young pinot noir vines alive in those early years. “There was really no advice to get — we had to learn as we went along,” he said.

Mr. Tunnell’s winery, Brick House Vineyards, celebrates its 20th anniversary in May; all the fruit is estate-grown and certified organic, and each season about 4,000
biodynamic operation down a quiet country lane near this small town, which has become something of an attraction for the green oenophile.

When it comes to winemaking these days, Willamette Valley wineries are on the leading edge of sustainable, eco-conscious practices. According to the Oregon Wine Board, more than 25 percent of Oregon’s vineyards are certified sustainable, organic, or biodynamic, classifications that require varying degrees of organic methods.

Oregon was also the pilot site for what is now a national wine-cork recycling program adopted by Whole Foods; it started as a partnership between Willamette Valley Vineyards and the Rainforest Alliance. Visitor interest has prompted eco-wine tours of the area’s top wineries, and the wine board has also offered wine-oriented “green getaway” packages.

Innovators include a winery and tasting room called the Carlton Winemakers Studio. It is the country’s first green-built cooperative winery, using natural light, recycled materials and as little electricity as possible, among other improvements. Ten independent small-batch wineries can share space at one time, and the studio has acted as an incubator for young, talented winemakers without a home. About 20 winemakers have come through since the studio opened in 2002.

And like many wineries along this laid-back and friendly wine trail, it’s also the kind of intimate place where you can run into your favorite winemaker while sampling flights. On a recent visit, my friend Sarah and I watched as the tasting room manager introduced two Portland fans of the winemaker Andrew Rich to the man himself, who happened to be the guest winemaker on duty.

“Everyone’s wines are featured on a rotating basis here in the tasting room,” said Mr. Rich, who poured a pinot noir flight that included creations by several different winemakers. We tasted Mr. Rich’s own flagship blend, the Andrew Rich Vintner 2006 Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, an earthy, berry-rich wine.

“Pinot noir is the dominant grape of the Willamette Valley — it’s challenging and difficult, but rewarding to make wine from it,” he said. “What you get is subtle,
Carlton Winemakers Studio has also begun a program of wine education classes taught by in-house vintners; topics range from subappellations of the Willamette Valley to sustainability in the vineyard.

Around the valley, typical tasting fees run about $5 to $10 per person, and are usually waived with the purchase of a bottle.

Of course, no one drinks green wines just because they’re green — they have to taste good, too. It’s notable that many of the area’s new breed of winemakers are respected longtime players in the industry. Robert Brittan of Brittan Vineyards was the winemaker and estate manager at Stags’ Leap Winery in Napa for 16 years; Eric Hamacher, a founder of Carlton Winemakers Studio, has produced wines for Robert Mondavi and others.

The practices associated with organic, sustainable winemaking are really the traditional ones, says Mr. Tunnell of Brick House Vineyards. “Our model from the start was Burgundy: small family farms,” he said. Mr. Tunnell and his wife, Melissa Mills, live in the brick house on their farm, the namesake of their label, and keep an organic garden.

“In the beginning, the vines looked pretty weird for a while, and they had to compete with everything from hardy native grasses to fungal diseases,” Mr. Tunnell said. “We did a lot of hand hoeing and planting of cover crops. And we learned that things like vegetable oils are really effective against mildew.”

In a typical season, Brick House puts out three to five bottlings of pinot noir, one of chardonnay, and one of gamay noir. We conducted our tasting in the barrel room; on an unusually cold spring day, it was the warmest room on the farm, with a yeasty scent of fermentation in the air. Mr. Tunnell pulled tastes from selected French-oak barrels with a “wine thief,” a glass extractor that reminded me of high school chemistry lab.

What will eventually become the 2009 gamay noir had a fruity, acidic character. We also tried a few current bottlings, including the 2007 Les Dijonnais, a light,
“There’s this generational shift happening here right now in food and wine — for them, local, sustainable and organic is just the starting point,” Ms. Mills said. “It’s the baseline.”

What impressed us about the places we visited was the lack of pretense: These were well-executed establishments filled with passionate people who wanted to share their knowledge. Mr. Tunnell and Ms. Mills say this collaborative feeling among growers and producers in the valley has led to a more intimate community than what is found in Napa or Sonoma.

Other wineries on the eco-trail include the nearby Stoller Vineyards, the first winery in the United States to receive a gold LEED certification, a green-building rating program, for its design and construction. The tasting room is all light and glass, and solar panels are visible on the roof of production buildings.

A bit farther south is Amity Vineyards, whose sulfite-free “eco wines” and other creations have received accolades from Robert Parker, Wine Spectator and the Oregon State Fair. The longtime organic producer Cattrall Brothers Vineyard is one of Amity’s grape sources.

For those on the eco-trail, there are also inventive places to stay, like Abbey Road Farm, a five-room bed-and-breakfast on a working farm with modern rooms inside converted grain silos. Circular rooms have floors warmed by radiant heat, Jacuzzi baths and expansive views of the lush countryside. Breakfasts are made from ingredients straight from the garden: farm-fresh egg frittatas, homemade granola with huckleberries and warm zucchini bread, all made by the proprietor, Judi Stuart. Trails crisscross the grounds, making it a lovely place to explore.

On our last night in the valley, we went to Thistle, a tiny restaurant in McMinnville opened last July by the chef Eric Bechard and his partner, Emily Howard. Everything, with the exception of the bread — which comes from down the block — is made by Mr. Bechard, with ingredients coming almost exclusively from 15 small farms within a 35-mile radius of the restaurant.
Valley selections, including Brick House.

“Our vision was really to marry the local community population with wine tourists and Portland folks,” Mr. Bechard told us as he served first-of-the-season Chinook salmon with pillowy gnocchi. “We don’t want them to have a California experience when they come here — this food is truly local, as much as we can make it.”

If You Go

VINEYARDS

Carlton Winemakers Studio, 801 North Scott Street, Carlton; (503) 852-6100; winemakersstudio.com; open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Tasting flights from $9 per person.

Brick House Vineyards, 18200 Lewis Rogers Lane, Newberg; (503) 538-5136; brickhousewines.com; tastings and tours by appointment Thursday to Saturday, $10 per person.

Stoller Vineyards, 16161 Northeast McDougall Road, Dayton; (503) 864-3404; stollervineyards.com; open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Friday, until 5 p.m. on weekends; tastings $10 per person, tours of winery by appointment.

Amity Vineyards, 18150 Southeast Amity Vineyards Road, Amity; (503) 835-2362; amityvineyards.com; open noon to 5 p.m. October to May, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. June to September.

WHERE TO EAT

Thistle, 228 Northeast Evans Street, McMinnville; (503) 472-9623; thistlerestaurant.com; dinner for two $80.

WHERE TO STAY

Abbey Road Farm, 10501 Northeast Abbey Road, Carlton; (503) 852-6278;
Around the world, Oregon wine is synonymous with quality. Even though it produces a comparatively small amount of wine versus other grape-growing states (ranking fourth nationally), Oregon labels consistently earn high scores in every major wine publication. And for further proof of its reputation, you only need to travel to major international cities, where you'll find Oregon wine on the menus of some of the world's finest restaurants. But despite this, there remains an unpretentious, even eccentric, spirit that perseveres. Up in the Dundee Hills at his organic-certified Eyrie Vineyards, Jason Lett keeps a flock of heritage-breed chickens. On a recent spring evening, his 9-year-old daughter, Phoebe, introduced each one by name before joining her father for pruning in the vineyard. Wine and chowder are two of Oregon's greatest assets, and both come together during this three-day festival in Florence October 5 - 7, 2018. You won't want to miss the Florence Wine & Chowder Trail this year. We're aware that these uncertain times are limiting many aspects of life as we all practice social and physical distancing. While we're continuing to feature destinations that make our state wonderful, we don't expect or encourage you to go check them out immediately. We believe that supporting local attractions is important now more than ever and we hope our articles inspire your future adventures! And on that note, please nominate your favorite local business that could use some love right now: https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/nominate/. We are thrilled to have been mentioned in a recent New York Times article titled "On This Oregon Trail, Pioneers Embrace Organic Wine." Here's an excerpt from the article, with link to full article at the bottom. Ten independent small-batch wineries can share space at one time, and the studio has acted as an incubator for young, talented winemakers without a home. About 20 winemakers have come through since the studio opened in 2002. And like many wineries along this laid-back and friendly wine trail, it's also the kind of intimate place where you can run into your favorite winemaker while sampling flights.