

NEW PLACES TO TASTE by CHRIS COOK

Announcing four must-visit tasting rooms that define the essence of “unique”

As the Southern Oregon AVA steadily gains recognition for quality wines, the pace of development has been speeding up. A whopping 56 percent of all Southern Oregon tasting rooms have been open less than 5 years, with untold others currently under construction or in their conceptual phase.

That’s impressive when you compare that statistic to the percent of new tasting rooms in the last 5 years in the Columbia Gorge—35 percent; and the Willamette Valley—28 percent.

Our region’s newest tasting room will open this May in Ashland’s Upper Emigrant Creek Valley. **Irvine & Roberts Family Vineyards** owners Dionne and Doug Irvine, and Kelly and Duane Roberts (Doug’s sister and brother-in-law) look forward to sharing an unparalleled tasting experience. In fact, Kelly and Duane have been in the hospitality business for years as owners of The Mission Inn Hotel & Spa, the iconic AAA Four-Diamond hotel in Riverside, California.

In this Northwest-inspired tasting room amidst the 28-acre vineyard, there will be wine pairing chef demonstrations hosted in the kitchen and winery dinners featuring locally-renowned chefs at the farm-style tables. Guests will have a choice of enjoying numerous bottlings of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Rosé at the tasting bar or in comfy seating by the fireplace. The multitude of windows will offer expansive views of the vineyards and winery. In warmer weather, the glass wall to the veranda will open to plenty of outdoor space to enjoy the vineyard setting.

With the new winery located in the hillside above the tasting room, the owners hope guests will get a stronger sense of the connection of the land to the wine. The winery will feature a private cellar for wine club tasting, dinners and tours.

“We are excited to tell our story,” Doug exclaims. “We have something unique that we look forward to sharing—from the 250-million-year-old soils to our vines planted in 2007 and 2012 to the end product in the glass. Our vision has always been to be the best in the world.”

“While we will be offering flights with bites—food and wine pairings—we are making the wine and the vineyard the primary focus,” Dionne says. “We want to create a warm, welcoming place where people can relax and feel a part of this genuine wine experience. We say, ‘Welcome home. Relax. Join us.’”

Moving on from the hills of Ashland to the foothills of Talent, we find the second-newest tasting room in Southern Oregon. **Pebblestone Cellars** began operations in 2004 with owners Pat and Dick Ellis selling wine off the back deck of their home. They opened their first tasting room in 2010—renting the 380-square-foot “little red house” adjacent to their vineyards.

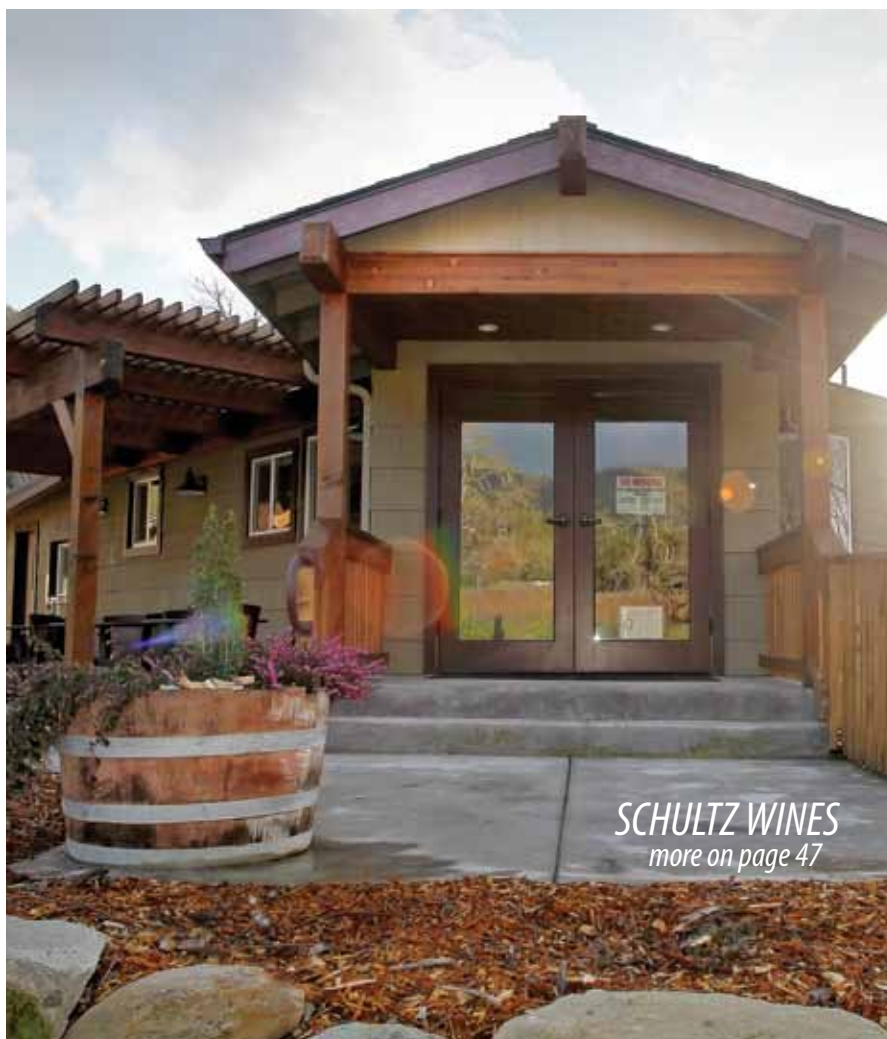
Collecting many prestigious awards for their wines, the Ellises have earned a reputation for quality wines and warm hospitality. In recent competitions, they bagged Best in Class for their 2014 Viognier in last year’s San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition and this year Double Gold for their 2012 Tempranillo.

Word of the quality of their wines and the charming venue spread quickly. Driven by increasing demand, the Ellises began design of a new tasting room on the south end of their property, never imagining that it would take four years to come to fruition. Through determination and perseverance, they completed the project late last year.

Pebblestone’s spacious new tasting room is set amidst a newly-planted portion of the vineyard and—from the outside—appears to be an old barn from pioneer times. Opening the large knotty alder doors, you see that this is no ordinary barn. The tasting room gleams with massive beams, tall knotty cedar ceilings, oak plank flooring and wrought iron chandeliers. In addition to the large dark granite tasting bar, there is plenty of additional seating and a private tasting room.

Exit the south side to a large covered porch seating 40. Broad mountain vistas, including views of Mt. Ashland and Wagner Butte, provide the perfect backdrop for guests enjoying live music on the weekends.





“We wanted our tasting room to fit the Oregon countryside,” Dick said. “The interior was inspired by pictures and buildings in Jacksonville built in the late 1800s. We tried to create the finished look and hand-crafted feel of a turn-of-the-century saloon. The facility has a refined elegance that matches the qualities we strive for in our wines.”

“We are flexible on many things, but we are unwavering in our desire to provide our guests with the best possible wine experience,” Pat says. With years’ experience owning a travel agency, Pat is a great asset in managing the tasting room. Stop by and say hello—you’ll frequently find both her and Dick behind the bar.

Make the trip to the beautiful Applegate Valley and you’ll find **Greg and Debbie Schultz’s** renovated 1940s farmhouse tasting room on their 60-acre Glory Oaks Vineyard and Farm. Everything in the tasting room is new except for the corner fireplace that Debbie painted white and the beautiful wide-board fir floors that had been hidden by orange shag carpet and linoleum. The bumped-up ceiling provides an open, airy feel and the clean, white walls show off black and white photography labels that tell the story of each wine. For example, the first label was for “Homeward Chardonnay,” a tip of the hat to Greg’s return to Oregon (his birthplace) from Louisiana in 2010. “We had taken many vacations up and down the West coast and Oregon had this pull. We find its beauty to be unmatched. And we love that Southern Oregon is able to grow so many varietals so well,” Greg explained.

The Schultzes established Schultz Wines in Southern Oregon in 2010 and in 2014 began developing their Applegate property. Their small-lot wines are made from premium fruit sourced from established local growers although they are planting vines with 2016 marking their first harvest.

There’s a good chance that you’ll find the Schultzes working in the tasting room during the weekend, and in the vineyards during the week. It’s oftentimes a two-person operation. “We like being farmers,” Greg says. “And we like to be able to talk with all our guests. We want the tasting room to feel like a comfortable farmstead where you can make yourself at home.”

“We wanted our guests to enjoy the beautiful setting so we situated the tasting bar to have a view of the vineyard and Slagle Creek,” Debbie explained. “We also encourage picnics on our deck. We’re a very friendly, laid back tasting room.”



If you’re looking for fun and adventure, hop over to Redwood Highway Route 199 and head to **Augustino Estate & Vineyard**—a treehouse tasting room that opened in January. Along the way you will pass long-established Illinois Valley wineries Deer Creek Vineyards and Foris Vineyards & Winery. Add their newly-acquired Bridgeview Vineyards & Winery located in the nearby Applegate Valley, and you could make a day of it.

Of the new tasting treehouse, owners Reggie Boltz and Debbie Spencer call it a ‘treeloon.’ “It’s a treehouse that is designed in the style of an old-fashioned saloon,” Reggie smiles. From the Rockin’ R Ranch brand on the large entry staircase to the swinging saloon doors, horse saddle stools and cowhide rugs, the place is fun, welcoming and writ large—like Reggie and Debbie’s hospitality.

“In keeping with our Italian tradition,” Reggie says, “we want people to come as friends and leave as family. It happens all the time and we love that about our place.” (Reggie was born an Augustino and took his stepfather’s last name at a young age.)

“At 1,500 square feet, we’re told this is the largest treehouse in the country. It is built around nine fir trees,” Debbie said. “We chose to build it on fir trees because they are not susceptible to disease and beetles—and Mother Nature put them in the perfect formation!”

Featured on “The Treehouse Guys,” a nationally-aired TV show, the treehouse tasting room overlooks the Siskiyou Mountains on one side and the rushing Illinois River on the other. “People love to come and picnic on the beach by the river,” Debbie says. “In the summer, we will be having barbeque parties and a new pizza oven. It’s a great place for a party, corporate retreat or reunion.”

For those who wish to spend the night, there are plans to put some cabins on the property. With themes like “sportsman” and “cattlemen,” the cabins will be high-end and well-appointed.

As we look at the new tasting rooms—in Ashland, Talent, the Applegate and Illinois Valley’s, each has its own personality. And while these new tasting rooms couldn’t be more different, two things are certain: you’ll be welcomed warmly—most likely by an owner—and you’ll find the wines delectable!