



The Dalles on cusp of blossoming into another upscale visitor destination in Columbia River Gorge

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By



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Copa di Vino Winery is a chic space in the old Sunshine biscuit mill on the east side of The Dalles.

Old is becoming new in **The Dalles**.

It's happened at the flour mill, the mint, the courthouse, railroad depot, flower store and private home of a cattle baron.

Even a once-tacky 1950s motor lodge, which fortunately was built with a panoramic clifftop view, has been converted into a boutique hotel.

One of Oregon's most important pioneer settlements, The Dalles reached a zenith during the eastern Oregon gold rush and steamboat era in the Columbia River Gorge.

By the late 19th century, downtown streets were lined with brick businesses and stately homes. Times change, and many were lost as the city modernized.

Then, more recently, its next-door neighbor to the west, Hood River, became cool beyond words.

City planners took note and realized that if Hood River could do it, so could The Dalles. Both will be part of a big summer in the gorge this year, with the 25th anniversary celebration of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Areas act.

The Dalles shares Hood River's Columbia River setting, is surrounded by fantastic outdoor recreation and both are nice places to live -- provided, in the case of The Dalles, you don't mind summer heat that regularly tickles 100 degrees.

A jump-start on The Dalles' future came in 2003, when an underpass beneath Interstate 84 reconnected downtown to its riverfront for the first time since the freeway was built in the 1960s.

The high-tech and medical industries have added momentum since. Construction this summer could bring the completion of the 10-mile Riverfront Trail and a downtown event site and river cruise ship dock.

And now, The Dalles has embraced wine.

If fact, The Dalles may have the most unusual -- and potentially one of the most spectral -- wine tourism feature in Oregon.



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A hilltop view shows the scenic setting of The Dalles in the Columbia River Gorge.



Bruce Ely/The Oregonian

The new rotary at the east end of The Dalles. Copa di Vino winery has its tasting room in the old Sunshine biscuit mill (the complex of grain elevators on the right).

You can't miss it. Anyone who has driven past The Dalles, by car or covered wagon, in the last 130 years has likely noticed the Sunshine biscuit mill at the east end of downtown. The old flour mill's 150-foot tall complex of a dozen connected grain silos is now **Copa di Vino winery**.

Hood River should be so lucky.

Copa di Vino isn't just any winery. It was born with an innovative idea -- the single-serve cup. Other wines are packaged as single serve, but Copa's plastic cup is perfect for selling and consuming on the go at places like Mt. Hood Meadows, the

Gorge Amphitheater and the Reserve Golf Club. It was a 2010 DuPont innovative packaging award winner.

The wine in the cup isn't what someone would drive great distances to taste, so the Copa di Vino tasting room serves Quenett, another brand also owned by James and Molli Martin.

The tasting room is likely to linger longer in the memory of visitors. Last fall, stylish Maryhill Museum of Art chose to announce its expansion plans in the Copa di Vino tasting room.

The wine room is outfitted with equipment reclaimed from the old mill, which was slated for demolition until the Martins convinced the city of its viability as a winery.

Conveyor belts, used for lifting wheat up the silos, dangle artistically overhead. Old shipping crates, fan covers and gears are converted to furniture or decor. Flour chutes are painted gold. Outside is an amphitheater for live entertainment and space for a bocce ball court.

What's there now is only the beginning. The Martins dream of adding a rooftop garden, a climbing wall, an artisan cheese shop, even a boutique hotel inside the grain silos.

The winery wouldn't have been possible without better access from Second Street out front. A \$3.5 million project, completed by the city last fall, has brought a traffic roundabout to the eastern entrance for The Dalles.

The roundabout is decorated with five historic murals, painted by local artist Jeff Stewart, that feature the sternwheeler era, mules helping harvest wheat, fishing at Celilo Falls, cherry orchards in bloom and immigrants arriving by covered wagons.

Across Second Street is another example of The Dalles' penchant for reusing historic buildings. The passenger station for the Great Southern Railroad, a long defunct short line that ran south from The Dalles to serve grain growers, is now home to Cannon Packer, seller of upscale gifts and home decor.

In the center of town, Clocktower Ales is in an 1880s Wasco County courthouse, Erin Glenn Wines has set up shop in a building designed in the 1860s to be a U.S. mint, Anzac Tea Parlor takes up an 1867 cattle king's home and Sigman's Flowers occupies the 1890 Oaks Hotel.

A story comes with each one of the changes.

"I think this was one of the lower-class hotels," said Claudia Leash, owner of the flower store for three decades. "The bathrooms were down the hall in a different building. And the hidden staircase served the patrons of the brothel well."



Bruce Ely/The Oregonian

The Dalles is very close to finishing its 10-mile Riverfront Trail, a bike/pedestrian path from the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center to The Dalles Dam.

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One business that looks as though times haven't changed is the Baldwin Saloon. It began under that name in 1876 and has maintained its original glory over the two decades that Mark and Tracy Linebarger have owned it.

The saloon is widely known for its collection of oil paintings: sprawling Western landscapes in the dining area, nudes in the bar. And the piano player never misses a weekend gig, except when she's elk hunting.

Another escapee of the wrecking ball is the 1921 Civic Auditorium, which was destined to become a parking lot until the city sold it for a dollar to a nonprofit preservation committee.

Restoration of the stately old building is half-complete, with the grand ballroom serving the local pingpong club and Rotary quite well. But it will take more years of fundraising and construction before symphony concerts and plays take center stage in the auditorium.

A successful example downtown is the Commodore building, constructed in 1906 as a grand Masonic Lodge. By the '90s, it was in ruins and slated for demolition, but the city helped find funds to restore and convert it to mixed residential and commercial space. Romul's Italian Restaurant offers elegant casual dining on the ground floor.

Back over on the east side of town, the 1950s era Inn at The Dalles has been transformed from a motor inn into the boutique **Celilo Inn** by Zar Sheikh of Portland, owner of a chain called **Gorge Hotels**.

Sister hotels in the chain are two Comfort Inns and a Sleep Inn, all part of midlevel national chains, so creating the Celilo Inn was a major venture.

The inn has a commanding view of the Columbia River and The Dalles Dam, so Sheikh took a gamble to make it the showcase of his hotel portfolio. His crews gutted the place and rebuilt it over a three-year period, outfitting the oversize rooms with high-quality pillow-top mattresses, flat-screen TVs, iPod ports, etc.

It lacks a dining room but brings guests together in a view room off the lobby for complimentary espresso, pastries and wine. The outside pool and patio with fire pit capitalize on typical balmy evenings May through September.

Guests need not drive far for some nostalgia: The Hi-Way House Restaurant is close by. The restaurant looks 1950ish on the outside, but the service and food inside rarely disappoint. A favorite of longtime residents, the restaurant has this motto: "Aged to Perfection."

Increasingly, the Dalles can make the same claim.

-- **Terry Richard**, follow him on **Twitter**

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