

Luxury and wine beckon in Walla Walla

By **JOHN GOTTBERG ANDERSON**
For EO Media Group

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Anand and Naina Rao could have chosen to live anywhere in the world. They opted to settle in a small prairie city at the foot of the Blue Mountains.

Raised in Kenya by Indian parents, educated in England and Switzerland, the gracious couple spent a career in management and design with luxury hotel groups. They lived in Paris, Kuwait, Bangkok, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., among other cities. They worked for companies like Hilton International and Ritz-Carlton.

In 2007, when their son was in school in Seattle, the Raos bought a piece of farmland 7 miles west of Walla Walla, not far from the Marcus Whitman National Historic Site. In 2015 they retired to their would-be estate. Armed with a creative vision and modest savings, they built a private retreat that blended perfectly with the natural environment. They called it “The Barn.”

The Barn opened on April 1 as a seven-room bed-and-breakfast inn.

“We didn’t want it to be big,” Anand said. “We knew it would be purpose-built. We could make every little detail happen.”

The inn pairs the simplicity of oasislike guest houses, one of them in a granary, with special touches of the Ritz. Guests feel it in the mattresses, the pillows, the bath amenities. An outdoor shower occupies a corner of a rocky courtyard that could double as a meditation garden. A wine cooler chills the selections guests have made at vineyards during daytime excursions.

The “barn” itself is a common area adorned not with stable tack, but with a lifetime of the hosts’ memories — paintings, carvings, mirrors, door frames and musical instruments from Kenya, Tunisia, Kuwait, France and Thailand. Breakfasts are served

here each morning, the joint effort of Naina and young chef Elizabeth Garza. Always globally inspired, they range from Moroccan shakshuka to Mexican huachucas. Monday and Thursday night dinners have a similar international flair.

During my visit, I was immediately made to feel a part of the Rao family with a heartfelt reception, rare in the world of hospitality. One might say the couple are paying it forward. “There’s a beauty, a tranquility, in Walla Walla, that blows us away,” Anand said. “Our goal is to create a special place, with its own magic, to make people feel special.”

Even Justin Wylie, a rival hotel owner, recognizes the Raos’ accomplishment. “They are helping to change the dynamic of hospitality here in Walla Walla,” said the founder of Va Piano Vineyards and the new Eritage Resort.

The Eritage Resort

Eritage opened in mid-2018 6 miles north of the city, where the valley begins to fold into the Palouse Hills. Prior to its establishment, Walla Walla had no go-to luxury getaway. Only the venerable 1927 Marcus Whitman Hotel in the heart of downtown rose above a flurry of franchise motels and ma-and-pa lodgings, many of them serving Whitman College visitors.

A visionary, Wylie had purchased 300 acres for the resort 10 years earlier. The Walla Walla native earned his degree from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, and fled to the vineyards of Italy’s Tuscany region before returning to his hometown as a winemaker. The first crush at Va Piano Vineyards (the name means “go slowly”) took place in 2003. The winery expanded to Bend in 2015 with a tasting room in the Old Mill.

Wylie had seen the Walla Walla wine industry grow from its infancy in the late 1970s to become one of the most highly regarded in the nation: Today, its

If you go
(All addresses in Walla Walla)

INFORMATION
Visit Walla Walla. 26 E. Main St.; www.wallawalla.org. 509-525-8799.

WHERE TO STAY
The Barn B&B. 1624 Stovall Road; bnbwallawalla, 509-795-0250. Rates from \$350.

Eritage Resort. 1319 Bergevin Springs Road; eritageresort.com, 509-394-9200. Rates from \$319.
The Marcus Whitman Hotel. 6 W. Rose St.; marcuswhitman-hotel.com, 866-826-9422. Rates from \$129.

WHERE TO DINE
Andrae’s Kitchen. 706 W. Rose St. www.andraeskitchen.com, 509-572-0728. Breakfast and lunch every day, dinner Monday to Saturday.
Brasserie Four. 4 E. Main St.; brasseriefour.com, 509-529-2011. Dinner only Tuesday to Thursday, lunch and dinner Friday and Saturday.

Hattaway’s on Alder. 125 W. Alder St.; hattawaysonalder.com, 509-525-4433. Dinner every day, brunch Saturday and Sunday.

Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen. 330 W. Main St.; saffron-mediterraneankitchen.com, 509-525-2112. Late lunch and dinner every day.

Walla Walla Steak Company. 416 N. Second Ave.; wwsteak-co.com, 509-526-4100. Dinner every day.

Whitehouse-Crawford. 55 W. Cherry St.; whitehousecrawford.com, 509-525-2222. Dinner Wednesday to Monday.

WINERIES
Bledsoe Family Winery. 229 E. Main St.; bledsoefamilywinery.com, 509-525-3334.

Doubleback. 3853 Powerline Road; doubleback.com, 509-525-3334.

TruthTeller Winery. 47 E. Main St.; truthtellerwinery.com, 425-985-3568.

Valdemar Family Estates. 3808 Rolling Hills Lane; valdemar-estates.com. 509-876-6762.

Va Piano Vineyards. 1793 J.B. George Road; vapianovineyards.com, 509-529-0900.

140-odd wineries make it a prime wine destination. But it didn’t have the lodging-and-dining infrastructure of California’s Napa and Sonoma valleys, or even Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

“We are an authentic farming community that grows seed grass, wheat and grapes,” Wylie said. “So our next step was to really focus on executing the hospitality.”

He teamed with Bend-based developer Scott Knox, who built an elegant hotel with rooflines that mimic the surrounding hills. Ten suites in the main hotel, and 10 more bungalows facing intimate Lake Sienna, offer expansive views among acres of vineyards. There are lawn games, water sports and fine dining overseen by

executive chef Brian Price.

Dining out

Wylie met me for dinner at the Walla Walla Steak Company, which opened last year in the city’s 1914 Northern Pacific railway depot. Built of red brick on a sandstone foundation, the station has retained its original wood floors, respectfully restored and handsomely accented with rustic fixtures and leather upholstery. It shares a wall with Crossbuck Brewing, a popular pub demonstrating that the city has great beers along with fine wines.

Jim Kiefer manages the Steak Company. He assured that our steaks were as delicious as the vintage bottle of Va Piano syrah that Wylie shared.

I sampled more of Va Piano’s goodness the following

day at his vineyards, located less than a mile north of the Oregon state line.

But my host understood that one can’t live on steak alone. He recommended these other Walla Walla restaurants:

- Whitehouse-Crawford, chef-owner Jamie Guerin’s long-popular restaurant in a converted lumber-planing mill. The wine-country menu is eclectic and hearty.

- Brasserie Four, a distinctly French restaurant on Main Street in the heart of the city. The menu is Parisian, the wine and art mostly local.

- Saffron, whose menu hits all corners of the Mediterranean, from Spain and Italy to the Middle East. A new West Main Street location makes it more spacious.

- Hattaway’s on Alder, which opened a couple of years ago in the former Saffron digs. Its cuisine is decidedly Southern-influenced.

- A popular stop for a casual lunch is Andrae’s Kitchen, in a former Cenex minimart on the west side of town. New York chef Andrae Bopp has perfected the concept of food truck-moves-indoors.

Doubling back

Upon his retirement from the NFL, Bend resident Drew Bledsoe “doubled back” to his roots, to the town where he once was a high school star, and began a new career in the wine business. Today, Bledsoe’s Doubleback wines are among the most exclusive in the valley, with cabernet sauvignons fetching upward of \$100 a bottle.

Doubleback is open by appointment only. Bledsoe introduced me to Josh McDaniels, the company’s president and director of winemaking, who greeted me at the southeast Walla Walla winery and gave me a tour.

“When Drew came out of the NFL and started a winery, he wasn’t a big egotistical athlete,” McDaniels recalled. “He wanted to base the business on a single quality wine. It was really important for him to

get away from the celebrity thing.”

The cabernet they have perfected is a wine of understated elegance, rich and full-bodied, with flavor and balance.

“We want a wine that is approachable on opening, but which peaks between five and 20 years,” McDaniels said.

Grapes chosen for the Doubleback label are “the best of the best,” he said. The second tier go into Bledsoe Family Wines — not just cabernets, but also syrah, chardonnay, rosé and a red blend. These are more modestly priced; they come from several vineyards in different parts of the Walla Walla valley.

The Bledsoe Family Winery welcomes walk-ins from Wednesday to Saturday. One of about three dozen tasting rooms in downtown Walla Walla, it is a model for a new Bledsoe Family Winery tasting room scheduled to open in Bend’s Box Factory in early August.

Among other new downtown wineries is TruthTeller. Winemaker and co-owner Chris Loeliger left his job in aerospace engineering when he got hooked on winemaking as a hobby. He first opened in Woodinville, near Seattle, in 2014, then in Walla Walla a year ago.

“There are very few of us who exist on both sides of Washington state,” he said, proudly.

The most impressive new winery in the valley is Valdemar Family Estates, which opened in April 2018. Situated immediately south of Amavi Cellars, Valdemar has a distinctly European flavor. Owner Jesús Martínez Bujanda, fifth-generation scion of a wine family in Spain’s Rioja region, made a \$20 million investment in Walla Walla. He retained French winemaker Marie-Eve Gilla, who spent the previous 17 years at Forgeron Cellars, to produce the new winery’s vintages. They may be enjoyed with a menu of tapas and other Iberian foods imported directly from the old country.

With a nudge from the young and sober, mocktails taking hold

By **LEANNE ITALIE**
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Five years ago, for her 27th birthday, Lorelei Bandrowschi gave up drinking for a month on a dare. She was a casual drinker and figured it would be easy. It was, but she hadn’t banked on learning so much about herself in the process.

“I realized that going out without drinking was something that I really enjoyed and that I was very well suited for,” she told The Associated Press. “I realized I’m a pretty extroverted, spontaneous, uninhibited person.”

And that’s how Listen Bar was born on Bleeker Street downtown. At just under a year old, the bar that Bandrowschi opens only once a month is alcohol-free, one of a growing number of sober bars popping up around the country.

Booze-free bars serving elevated “mocktails” are attracting more young people than ever before, especially women. The uptick comes as fewer people overall are drinking alcohol away from home and the #MeToo movement has women seeking a more comfortable bar environment, said Amanda Topper, associate director of food-service research for the global market research firm Mintel.

Mocktails aren’t just proliferating at sober bars. Regular bars and restaurants are cluing into the idea that alcohol-free customers want more than a Shirley Temple or a splash of cranberry with a spritz.

Alcohol-free mixed drinks grew 35% as a beverage type on the menus of bars and restaurants from 2016 to this year, according to Mintel. Topper said 17%



Saleina Marie Photography via AP

A bartender serves patrons Rae of Sunshine mocktails at Sans Bar pop-up bar at The Factory Luxe in Seattle, a Marnie Rae launch party for National Mocktail Week.



AP Photo/Leanne Italie

Cat Tjan, 27, of Jersey City, N.J., left, and Ammar Farooqi, 26, from Williamstown, N.J., posing with their mocktail dubbed Me, a Houseplant. The mocktail is a green concoction comprised of Seedlip’s Garden 108 variety (the one with the peas), cucumber, lemon and elderflower at Listen Bar in New York.



AP Photo/Erin Minichiello

Lauren Minichiello, 11, holds a Rose Martini mocktail at a restaurant at Wequassett Resort and Golf Club in Harwich, Massachusetts.

of 1,288 people surveyed between the ages of 22 to 24 who drink away from home said they’re interested in mocktails.

The interest, she said, is also driven in part by the health and wellness movement, and the availability of higher quality ingredients as bartenders take mocktails more seriously.

“It really started a few years ago with the whole idea of dry January, when consumers cut out alcohol for that month,” Topper said. “It’s shifted to a long-term movement and lifestyle choice.”

Listen Bar recently hosted a mocktail competition for mixologists, who whipped up drinks that included The Holy Would, comprised of citrusy, distilled, non-alcoholic Seedlip Grove 42, palo santo syrup, low-acid apple juice, lemon and lime bitters produced with glycerin, and verjus, the pressed juice of unripened grapes. The drink is the brainchild of Fred Beebe, a bartender at Sunday in Brooklyn. The restaurant isn’t alcohol-free, but Beebe helped create an extensive mocktail menu that goes well beyond the sugary choices of yore, using unique ingredients.

Palo santo, for instance, is a tree native to Peru, Venezuela and Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula that loosely translates to “holy wood” and is widely used in folk remedies.

“Everybody should be able to have a delicious drink at a bar,” Beebe said. “Hospitality is making sure everybody has a good time. Alcohol, for me, is not the most important part of a cocktail anymore. The cool juices and syrups and tinctures and mixtures and all that stuff makes a lot of the fun.”