

BACK TO THE LAND

On the farms of the Pacific Northwest, America's pioneer spirit is alive and well and flying the flag for grassroots food. Patrick Symmes follows the agritourism trail from Seattle to Portland. Photographs by Peter Frank Edwards



HERE WAS A TELESCOPE at The Willows Inn, but I didn't really need it. From the breakfast table I could see the harbour seal, blubbery and self-satisfied, floating head up for a minute or two, then diving again with a frantic slapping of the tail. The currents off Lummi Island, just off the coast of Washington State, are strong, and on a crisp blue day you can see all the way to Vancouver, British Columbia, 60 miles away.

Breakfast arrived, and with it the chef, Blaine Wetzel, just 27. We'd met the night before, as he prepped and plated a dinner for 36, assembled almost entirely from ingredients harvested around Lummi. Wetzel had been working in Copenhagen before this, the place for high-flying conceptual food, but he insisted there was nothing Scandinavian about his eccentric tasting menus, which cost about £100 per person and are sourced by foraging the island, combing its beaches, harvesting its water, and gardening its hills.

Going local has forced Wetzel to plan far ahead, cook seasonally and tease maximum flavour from what is at hand. If the island gives you nettles, you learn to coax the greatness out of nettles.

Lamb or pork is delivered with a phone call. The endless cultivation of just four acres up the hill gives him lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, squash blossoms, nasturtium flowers, courgettes and herbs.

There was a time when every farm in the USA fed itself this way, but cooking local is now a choice, 'kind of a challenge', Wetzel said proudly. He takes indigenous foods such as seaweed and salmon roe and oven-crisps them between sheets of aluminum foil, sculpted into waves, creating a salty abstraction of the sea.

Wetzel was interrupted by a call, and returned later carrying a wooden box holding a salty boule of bread and some creamy

Lummi Island butter. It was the island's fishing cooperative calling. 'They got 5,000,' he said, referring to sockeye salmon, which run through the islands in the late summer, heading towards the Fraser River in British Columbia. That solved the mystery of the seal out in the water: he was feasting on sockeye.

According to Josh Virtel, former president of Slow Food

USA, agritourism is 'bubbling up in any place where rich farmland is close to a city, and the farmers are growing real food, not corn and soybeans.' It happens in New York's Hudson River Valley and outside Atlanta, and it's particularly widespread in the Pacific Northwest.

Within minutes of driving off the Lummi Island ferry and onto the mainland, I was turning south onto Interstate 5 (I5), the north-south superhighway that bisects the region, to explore an emerging trail of agritourism operations. The road takes hungry food pilgrims to Seattle, the city that revived coffee and so much else in the American palate, and then Portland, the country's foodie capital. It carries you from farm dinners in the Cascade Mountains all the way down to northern California's Mendocino. It is

this swathe of the country that has volunteered to serve as a laboratory for adapting agritourism from European models, and is helping rescue the traditional family farm.

My next destination, the Herbfarm in Woodinville, Washington, 28 miles east of Seattle, is a pioneer of ultra-seasonal and garden-raised cuisine. Modelled on a French mountain inn, the Herbfarm has developed a year-round rotation of boldly obsessive suppers – mushroom extravaganzas for a month, three weeks dedicated entirely to food that goes well with red wines – for which it has won repeated accolades as a top destination restaurant. It was originally a small herb farm run



Clockwise from top left: mushrooms on Lummi Island; Willows Inn chef Johnny Ortiz forages for herbs; a farm dinner at Kiyokawa Family Orchards, and its deconstructed BLT; Lummi Island beach shack. Opposite, a suite at The Willows Inn and, previous page, its dish of blackberries and wild grass broth





by owner Ron Zimmerman's parents; when that burned to the ground in 1997, Zimmerman and his wife, Carrie Van Dyck, replaced it with an idealised agritourism operation set in the fields, with herb beds and a couple of rooms for rent. (There's also an 84-room hotel across the street called the Willows Lodge.)

Tonight, the Herbfarm was offering its most popular menu of the year, the Hundred-Mile Dinner. Chef Chris Weber sources the entire nine-course meal entirely from the fields and waters within

that radius, and every ingredient on the menu is checked with a GPS unit. For our starter, Van Dyck led a tour of the herb garden, a small set of raised beds with views of vineyards. Fortified by sage-infused cocktails, about 35 diners followed her slowly, talking, rubbing, smelling and chomping our way through aromatic appetisers: lemon thyme, scented geranium, bronze fennel and three basil. Along the way, Van Dyck tossed sprigs into the air like bouquet bombs.

Inside, settled in among a hundred guests, Zimmerman introduced his staff and then evoked a foodie apocalypse. 'What if the rest of the world vanished?' he asked us. 'What would be the flavours of a cuisine of the Salish Sea?' That's the old, tribal name for Puget Sound, the long slick of bays, islands, and channels that unites and defines this region. For Weber, defining that cuisine meant wrestling with some tough restrictions: no black pepper, no olive oil or vanilla or saffron. Oregon wines were out of reach, as were the majority of Washington wines, grown far to the east in Walla Walla and other sunny parts. But there would be five genuinely local Washington wines, plus one from Canada. That producer, Averill Creek, is on Vancouver Island, but the south-facing valley where its Pinot Noir grows is bisected by the hundred-mile circle. Zimmerman did not try to separate the southern molecules from the northern ones, and ruled the resulting bottles in.

At supper, the courses included summer-berry soup, seared foie gras with hazelnuts, sorrel salsa verde, squash blossoms from the garden stuffed with what the menu called 10-mile lamb ('actually, it's three-mile lamb,' Zimmerman said). The cooking was rooted, consistent, an entertainment, and also contained one of my favourite ingredients: failure. Amid the successes – the lamb tied for the best I've ever had, and I was once a shepherd in New Zealand – we puzzled over the five-grain bread, rich but dull. It sat, studied but uneaten, as unloved as the chicory

'coffee' that ended the meal. What else got eaten? Sockeye salmon, blazing red. It was as fresh as fish gets, having arrived from Lummi that very day.



SPRIGS OF HERBS WERE TOSSED IN THE AIR LIKE BOUQUET BOMBS

VERY AUTUMN
80,000 salmon
swim through
downtown

Portland – how could it not be a food city? It is also one of the youngest cities in the USA, demographically, crowded with Generation Food, the snout-to-tail eaters in their twenties and thirties who demand something more than the usual restaurant experience.

And thanks to open-space legislation dating back to 1963, Portland is belted with small farms and orchards on land that would have become shopping malls anywhere else. Obsessive food culture isn't eccentric or marginal here: local politicians have courted a powerful demographic known as 'the chicken people', and hipsters

in fligid beards relax by hacking up small animals during classes at the Portland Meat Collective.

Portland is proof that a city can nurture appetites that in turn renew the rural areas around it. Such transformations have been reviving places such as the Hood River Valley, an hour east of Portland in the Cascade Mountains. In the 1960s and 1970s, the valley was in decline, a hard-luck hollow of family farms on the verge of failure. Today, Hood River Valley has a pleasant mixture of agriculture and tourism, where

This page, artichoke at The Herbfarm in Washington State. Opposite, clockwise from top left: blackberries at Sakura Ridge Farm, Oregon; the Farm to Fork dinner at Kiyokawa Family Orchards, and the salad of watermelon, baby beets, mint and ricotta; telling the time at Sakura Ridge Farm

OUR DINING ROOM WAS MADE OF BROWN DIRT, THE SPACE CANOPIED BY A BLUE SKY AND A LOW-HANGING SUN

micro-wineries sit next to corn mazes, and big commercial orchards exist beside small patches marked with cardboard signs reading ‘Strawberries U-pick \$4’.

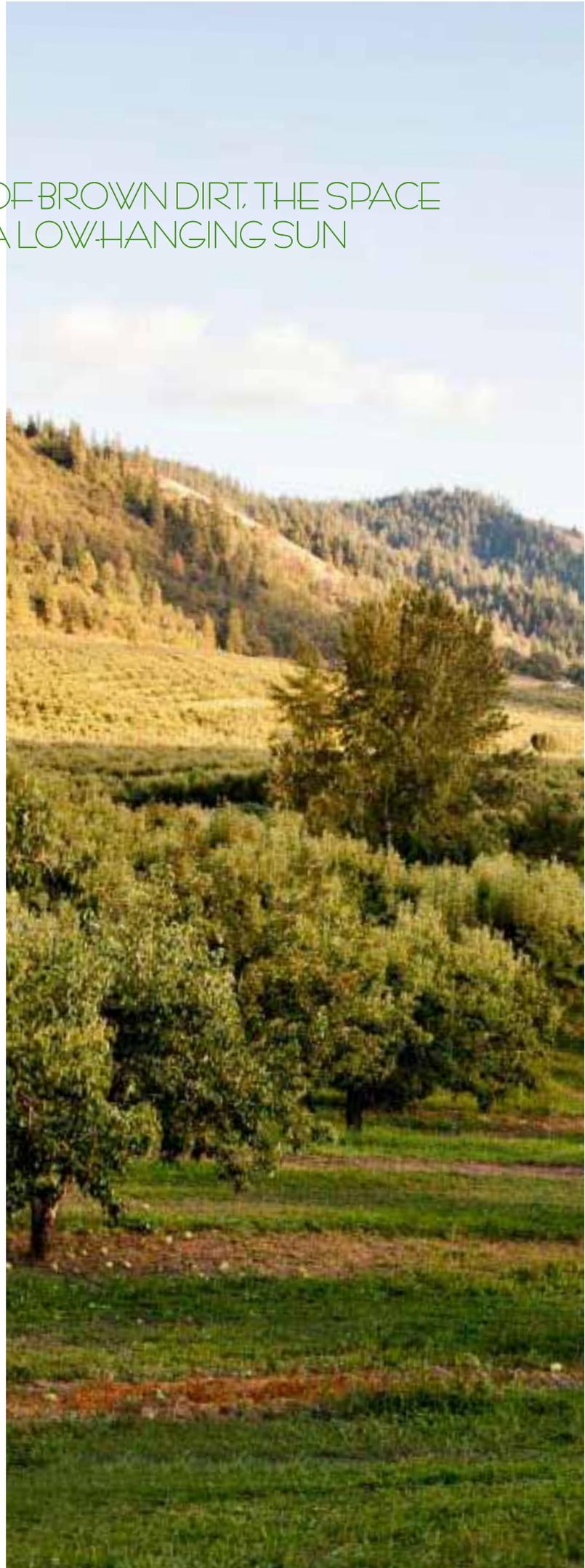
Sakura Ridge, a farmhouse inn, provides luxury bedding amid bleating lambs and a 40-acre cherry orchard. And up at the head of the valley lies Kiyokawa Family Farms, run by the same Japanese clan for four generations. The Kiyokawas have carefully shepherded some 80 obscure cultivars of apples and pears through the great consolidation of crops during the 20th century. They’ve gone bust only once in the process, which is some kind of record in farming, and now people show up not only to buy their obscure fruit but to actually go out and pick it themselves.

Beyond the rows of Tokyo Roses and Ashmead’s Kernels, I found Matthew Domingo, the owner of a catering company called Farm to Fork, setting up a for a massive farm dinner in the middle of a pear orchard. At least four companies are running these farm dinners across the USA, including the wittily named Outstanding in the Field. Domingo rotates his dinners from valley to valley around Oregon during the summer. Dining out in a meadow beneath the snowy peak of Mount Hood isn’t just about pleasure, he assured me. ‘We want to bring people to farms,’ he said, ‘It’s a new income stream for the families out here.’

For his next dinner, I drove up to Bend, in Oregon’s central Cascade Range, where 165 people – a mixture of locals and visitors from across the state – had gathered at the Fields Farm. Our dining room was made of brown dirt, fringed with green rows of sweet onions on one side and leeks on the other, the space canopied by a blue sky and a low-hanging sun. We ate at four long trestle tables dressed in white and silver, and we ate local, of course. Domingo’s servers spread out platters of beef from Dancing Cow Farm, 25 miles to the east. The lamb? It was butchered an hour north, in arid little Maupin. The cornmeal was from Bob’s Red Mill, an award-winning grinder in Milwaukie, Oregon. Pickled apple slices from the Kiyokawa orchard were head-clearingly tart. The beet greens set some sort of record for localness. Grown about a hundred feet to the west of our table, they’d never known a roof or a truck.

Moving south again on the I-5, I climbed slowly up the Willamette Valley, Oregon’s wine country. Vineyards set the pattern long ago for agritourism, fostering a go-to-the-source mentality among customers. Yet when vineyards and other producers have tried to embrace commercial agritourism, they’ve often run into resistance. Some Oregon counties restrict the

East of Portland in the Hood River Valley, a hotbed of agritourism. Following page, the Farm to Fork dinner at Kiyokawa Family Orchards







number of buildings a farm can have, blocking them from opening guesthouses. And a chef in Walla Walla, Washington, corrected me when I called about his restaurant, said to be the best in that farming community. He didn't have a restaurant, he told me; thanks to zoning laws, he had a 'private supper club,' serving by reservation only.

McMinnville, the town at the centre of Oregon's wine industry, offers a high-low look at eating and drinking. I visited the tasting room of Soter Vineyards, which overlooks coiffed hillsides of vines and mixed crops, where Norfolk Horn sheep graze. Further south, I drove half an hour off the I-5 to visit the King Estate, a winery and restaurant complex on a hilltop overlooking 500 acres of organic grapes trimmed as neatly as a Medici garden. Visitors were crowding the restaurant, which stays busy seven days a week serving 'free-run' beef from seven miles down the road, vegetables from half that distance, and its own charcuterie.

But they don't do lodging. In Oregon, as in much of the USA, long-ago food scares at farm stands and dairies led to a ban on farm restaurants and to other restrictions. Farms must navigate a narrow path of exceptions for bed-and-breakfasts and catering licenses. I spent the night at one of the champions of this tricky course, a farm in western Oregon known as the Leaping Lamb, in Alsea. The owner, Scottie Jones, has become a

leading proponent of agritourism, which she calls 'a loose term – it can be anything from a pumpkin patch and corn maze to having people stay on your farm or ranch.'

AND NOW, ROAD-WEARY and food-satiated, I came to Willow-Witt Ranch, on the Oregon-California border, outside Ashland. Here was agritourism at its best. On a goat and pig farm in a soft Cascades valley, Brooke Willow showed me to my safari tent in a grassy meadow. There were two of these large tents, on elevated platforms, with soft beds and old steamer trunks. Nigerian dwarf goats bleated in the background, ready to produce the ranch's award-winning cheese. Pigs – destined for the dining tables of Ashland – rooted around out in the woods. The ranch also has a small, polished cabin, making this one of the larger farm-stays I'd visited. They'd needed a special permit to build the one cabin but the Serengeti-style tents are considered campground facilities and are easier to permit. Farm life is hedged in by rules of all kinds, said Willow. Raw milk, cheese and meat are regulated like weapons of mass destruction. The farm is forced to process its 'local' pork at a US Department of Agriculture facility three hours away, then drive it back to Ashland. 'Everybody is making it up as they go along,' she says. 🍷

FARM TO PLATE IN TWO STATES

WASHINGTON

The Willows Inn (+1 360 758 2620; www.willows-inn.com; doubles from about £90), on **Lummi Island**, can arrange foraging walks; the morning farm tour is recommended. **The Herbfarm** (+1 425 485 5300; www.theherbfarm.com) in **Woodinville**, near Seattle, offers garden tours before its themed meals. Sleep it off next door at the sleek **Willows Lodge** (+1 425 424 3900; www.willowslodge.com; doubles from £145). **Quilliscut Farm** (+1 509 738 2011; www.quilliscut.com), in **Rice**, runs courses on sustainable farming, cheese-making and curing.

OREGON

In **McMinnville**, in the heart of the Willamette Valley, **Thistle** (+1 503 472 9623; www.thistlerestaurant.com) carries the snout-to-tail banner of carnivores, with locally foraged and farmed ingredients. **Nick's Italian Café** (+1 503 434 4471; www.nicksitaliancafe.com) almost single-handedly established the reputation of Oregon wines, which go well with

its wood-fired pizzas. Stay at the boho-chic **McMenamin's Hotel Oregon** (+1 503 472 8427; www.mcmenamins.com; doubles from £40). In **Newberg**, **The Painted Lady** (+1 503 538 3850; www.thepaintedladyrestaurant.com) serves gourmet wine-country cuisine, and the **Allison Inn & Spa** (+1 503 554 2525; www.theallison.com; doubles from £205) is all Pacific Northwest Modern in wood and stone. The sleepy town of **Carlton** is home to **Abbey Road Farm** (+1 503 852 6278; www.abbeyroadfarm.com; doubles from £115), with five curious but appealing suites in three converted grain silos, and **Soter Vineyards** (+1 503 662 5600; www.sotervineyards.com). East of Portland in **Troutdale**, the McMenamin brothers have converted a 1911 'poor farm' into the **Edgefield Hotel** (+1 503 669 8610; www.mcmenamins.com; doubles from £45), with its own vineyard and a superb restaurant. In **Hood River**, **Sakura Ridge** (+1 541 386 2636; [\[sakuraridge.com\]\(http://sakuraridge.com\); doubles from £120\) is an agritourism-style inn; and the **Kiyokawa Family Orchards** \(+1 541 352 7115; \[www.mthoodfruit.com\]\(http://www.mthoodfruit.com\)\) is at **Parkdale**. Further south, outside **Eugene**, is the **King Estate winery** \(+1 541 685 5189; \[www.kingestate.com\]\(http://www.kingestate.com\)\), while for a farm stay head to **Alsea** and the **Leaping Lamb** \(\[www.leapinglambfarm.com\]\(http://www.leapinglambfarm.com\); doubles £100\). Near **Ashland** is the **Willow-Witt Ranch** \(+1 541 890 1998; \[www.willowwitranch.com\]\(http://www.willowwitranch.com\); doubles from £85\). In the city, sharpen your knife-skills with the **Portland Meat Collective** \(\[www.pdxmeat.com\]\(http://www.pdxmeat.com\)\).](http://www.</p>
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GETTING THERE

BA (www.ba.com) and **American Airlines** (www.americanairlines.co.uk) fly direct from London to Seattle. **Farm to Fork** (www.farmtoforkevents.com) and **Outstanding in the Field** (www.outstandinginthe.field.com) arrange farm dinners and tours.

