


TECHNICAL SPOTLIGHT

Valdemar Estates' Revolutionary Inclusive and Accessible Winery Program

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IN 2019, SPAIN'S BODEGAS VALDEMAR established Valdemar Estates in Walla Walla, making it Washington's first internationally owned winery. But Valdemar Estates also claims fame for another reason—its innovative accessibility and inclusion program. The winery draws from parent estate's Bodegas Valdemar's own award-winning accessibility and inclusivity initiatives, which were established in 2018.

“Five years ago, our winery in Rioja became the first winery in Europe to be 100% inclusive and accessible to all kinds of disabilities, which is something that we're very passionate and pretty excited about,” said Jesús Martínez Bujanda Mora, the fifth-generation Bodegas Valdemar owner and CEO of Valdemar Estates.

Accessible and Inclusive

While Valdemar Estates draws inspiration partly from parent company Bodegas Valdemar’s inclusivity and accessibility strategies, they also rely upon input from Walla Walla’s local disabled community.

U.S. federal requirements add another layer of complexity, specifically the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a law signed by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. The law’s stated goal is to “ensure equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation. It also mandates establishment of Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) and telephone relay services.”

In essence, the law codifies work, commercial, and public services accessibility guidelines for disabled individuals. To clarify, the District of Columbia Office of Disability Rights refers to “accessible” as “a site, facility, work environment, service, or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in, and/or use safely and with dignity by a person with a disability.”

However, a key distinction between Valdemar Estates and other accessibility plans of action is that Valdemar pivots around the spirit, rather than the letter of the law.



The impetus for the Bodegas Valdemar’s accessibility efforts arose out of a desire to serve overlooked or under-represented groups, such as families with children. Over time, the estate broadened its reach to include guests with special needs, such as those who are sight- or hearing-impaired.

“The key word is not only accessible, but inclusive,” emphasized Martínez Bujanda Mora. “They don’t want a special experience for them, they want do exactly the same thing.”

One such memorable tour invited approximately 50 blind people to participate in harvest at Bodegas Valdemar. “They were harvesting in the vineyard and pressing the grapes from the field—the whole process,” recalled Martínez Bujanda Mora. “And it was just such an interesting and rewarding experience.”

For these novel inclusivity efforts, Bodegas Valdemar won the “2019 Drinks Tourism Challenge” award for “Most Innovative Tour” in Europe. The following year, Bodegas Valdemar also earned the prestigious “Best of International 2020” award from Best of Wine Tourism Awards.



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“People tend to think of accessibility in terms of wheelchair access and that’s usually as far as they go,” said Matt Whitfield, director of marketing for Valdemar Estates. “When we talk about inclusivity, we’re talking about all the scenarios in which someone, whether they have a disability or are in an environment that could cause limited ability, would be and then correct for those scenarios, versus just trying to provide something that is wheelchair accessible.”

Seamless Design

For Valdemar Estates, accessibility and inclusiveness starts at the front door. Designed by Seattle architectural firm Boxwood Architects, the two-story facility seamlessly incorporates style and function.

Guests drive into a single-level, exterior parking lot with disabled parking near the front entry and clearly marked wheelchair-accessible curbs. The wheelchair-wide, automatic front entry door opens into a bright, spacious foyer.

To the left of the foyer stairwell, an elevator with clearly marked buttons and grab bars awaits anyone who may need it. Underneath the stairwell, extra wheelchairs stand at the ready.

On the right side of the entry foyer, a sensory tasting salon anchors reservations-only blending seminars. Flanking one of the salon walls stands a bespoke, wheelchair-height sensory display table fabricated by respected Walla Walla wood worker Ken Seright. Glass vials fitted with olfactory pumps, similar to those of perfume flacons, sit atop the table. Each vial stores different primary, secondary and tertiary wine aroma components, such as vanilla bean, dried currants, and tobacco.

“If you’re participating in the blending class, we have it set up so that you can smell your way through the wines,” Whitfield said. “When we build out these experiences, we always try and think of creating an environment where it’s quiet and we create print material that is easily legible.”

Virtual Accessibility

Next to each vial, QR-coded tasting cards with ‘hyper-legible’ large font, icons, and pictures offer better readability for guests with low vision, or neurodivergence. (Neurodivergent conditions include autism, dyslexia, or dyspraxia, also known as developmental co-ordination disorder [DCD].)

Located in the lower and upper level foyers, free-standing displays of historic winery equipment from Bodegas Valdemar marry old world traditions with new world designs.



In between the elevator and the tasting salon, a dramatic wood and metal staircase winds up to the tasting room. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling glass-walled tasting room, a wraparound terrace proffers sweeping views of the Walla Walla landscape.

Accessibility details echo throughout, including a sleek, wheelchair-height Silestone (quartz composition) bar, where guests check in.

Within the tasting room, stylish, wheelchair-height couches and chairs juxtapose with high-topped tables and stools, all custom-designed by Spanish designers Enea Design and Stua.

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The ceiling and wall sound baffling softens music and conversations. Even barware plays a supporting role, such as shatterproof Riedel wine glasses, and hands-free holders. Whitfield explained that the hands-free wine holders are lanyards that are worn like a necklace, securing the wine glass against the wearer's chest.

"We have these in stock, and they are most useful during winery tours where participants need the use both hands to navigate space; one example is wheelchair mobility," he said.

Full Spectrum

Accessibility also informs communication details, like winery signage and tasting cards, both of which contain QR codes leading to the winery website and videos in American Sign Language, closed captions, and audio descriptions of the facility, menu items and family history.

Further, Valdemar Estates employs accessibility web design software by AudioEye on their winery website. Key accessible web design elements include high contrast text as well as screen readers or braille displays for the visually-impaired, and mouse-free website navigation for those with limited mobility or motor control.

Despite recent studies by the American Foundation for the Blind refuting the decline of braille literacy, Valdemar Estates nonetheless endeavors to include audio descriptors and ALT text on their website, as well as in its emails and social media. Also known as 'alternative text,' ALT text contains a snippet of text describing the content of a website image.

Community Input

A cornerstone of Valdemar Estates' accessibility and inclusion plan involves the Walla Walla and Columbia Counties' Accessible Community Advisory Committees (ACAC). Founded in April 2019, it's the state's first joint committee and it collaborates with other committees statewide to improve accessibility issues. Beginning in 2021, the winery started teaming up with ACAC for training and feedback.

"Our training (and several meetings) includes much uplifting of myths that have been around for years about disabilities," said Connie Taylor-Randall, chair of the ACAC. "The romanticized idea that all deaf people sign, or that all blind people can't see anything at all. We also raised the myth that most blind people read braille when they don't. Valdemar Estates winery has learned these myths to help them be more connected to those with limitations. It brought awareness to a whole new level for Valdemar."

As a result of this alliance, the winery consults with ACAC about possible future design improvements. ACAC committee member Anikó Kuschatka said her participation with Valdemar was to provide information and training on communication with the deaf and hard of hearing.

"Since I am also visually impaired, I provided some tips on how to deal with those with visual limitations as well. It has been a wonderful and educational experience for Valdemar. They were such a pleasure to work with," she recalled.

Kuschatka recommended some bathroom design enhancements, beyond the requisite grab bars.

"While many wineries are driven to make their establishments unique and beautiful, some of them continue on to make their restrooms as well," said Kuschatka. "That is perfectly fine, however, to find things with unique shapes yet simple services can be challenging, especially when there isn't any contrast."

Instead, she suggests introducing a dark and complementary addition on or around the items for someone with visual limitations, for example, a black tile frame around a soap dispenser, or a round tile frame around the flush switch button.

The winery also conducts ongoing accessibility tours to fine-tune logistics.

"We had a group of about 15 or 20 people come through, and we did a tour," Whitfield said. "That was a really good learning experience for us. A lot of people with visual disabilities [are] certified [to have] their animals with them, so it becomes a big process of wrangling. When you open a door, two people can go through easily but if it's two people in wheelchairs, and they've got somebody with them and they have a service animal, then it becomes a differently paced tasting or tour."

Interestingly, Valdemar Estates discovered that the special needs tastings and tours typically do not increase time demands.





“If they’re coming for some tapas and wine, they’re usually in and out in an hour and a half and if they’re staying a little bit longer than that, that’s no problem. We’re flexible,” Whitfield said.

Hospitality Innovations

Most importantly, the ACAC training helped Valdemar Estates transform its hospitality mindset and approach.

“Early on, some of our consultants said a lot of people aren’t born blind, a lot of people experience their disability by aging into it,” Whitfield said. “This includes people who lost their hearing over time, or may require a walker, limiting their mobility and desire to get out.”

As a result of this insight, staff proactively inquire about any special needs when booking reservations and then record them into the Tock reservation system. Such requests may include special accommodations for a service animal or engaging a sign interpreter for the hearing impaired. Whitfield said something as simple as knowing we have an elevator can be helpful.

Other nuances extend to group dynamics.

“For example,” Whitfield said, “if somebody is hard of hearing, one of the things that we quickly learned is that you don’t want to only speak to that person, and direct everything to them, because then it makes them feel like they’re being singled out and uncomfortable.”

Instead, tasting room staff establish eye contact with everyone in the group and address each person in the group without drawing attention to the hearing-impaired guest.

For those with mobility issues, staff offer their elbow to guests and walk slightly ahead at a slow pace, pointing out landmarks, such as doors, stairs, curbs, or other landmarks prior to approaching them. Staff never touch the guest without asking permission first.

When seating sight-sensitive guests, staff settle them away from the tasting room’s bright windows, or the terrace’s glittering water features. They take care to seat hearing-impaired guests in quiet areas away from distracting background noises, like the interior music system speakers, or exterior water features.

Sensitivity and Empathy

Classic steps of service during food and wine pairings reflect this heightened sensitivity and empathy. Whitfield explained that when somebody has a visual disability, they can’t rely on classic steps of service.

“So, for example, if you’re sitting at a table, and somebody approaches, we’ve trained our staff to make sure that they’re clear about their approach, and that they set the glass down where they would expect the glass to be.”

Other staff adjustments include speaking directly to the guest and vocalizing each movement, such as arriving and departing the table, refilling a drink, or removing an item. Speaking with specificity proves crucial, particularly when placing an item on the table.

Whitfield said they also have plates with lips that have an edge on the outside so that diners who are blind- or visually impaired know where the edge of the plate is, and they can use that to assist them.

Staff also alert visually impaired guests about the availability of braille menus and bottle labels.

“They’re nothing fancy, just very simple paper menus,” Whitfield said. “For people that do read braille, it can be exceptionally helpful, and we can tape those on the bottle and they can take them home.”

Another revelation involves enunciation. Whitfield noted that sometimes, if you have a hearing disability, you rely on lip reading.

“It can be very hard to read somebody’s lips when they have a beard,” he said. As a result, Valdemar Estates avoids assigning bearded waiters to guests with hearing-disabilities.

Bearded server Christopher Burns, a 25-year hospitality veteran, proves this exception.

“Specifically, with groups of visually impaired or blind people, it challenges me as a longtime server to rethink through my processes,” Burns said. “Normally with a table, my goal is to do a silent service where I make no noise at the table but with people who are blind, they need to know what’s happening.”


Consequently, Burns steps a bit harder on his approach to the table, always approaching from the same side, telling blind guests not only what’s he’s serving them, but the shape of the plate and that plate’s relation to everything else in front of them.

“Honestly, it’s a really a great refresher in the basics of hospitality that often can become a little bit rote,” Burns said. “I feel like often they’re getting a level of service that they don’t necessarily experience elsewhere, and as such, it helps for them to know that they are not only welcome and accommodated, but that it’s a legitimate joy for us to serve them.”

Improved Excellence

Ultimately, Valdemar Estates hopes its efforts may inspire other Walla Walla wineries to develop their own accessibility and inclusion programs.

“I think one of the things that I will say from personal experience is that none of these things are easy to do,” Whitfield concluded. “It takes time and commitment to consult with people, and then translate that into training for your staff. Even printing something like braille labels: they’re a little expensive, it’s hard to find printers, and someone who can do the translating. We don’t use these very often, but I would hope that other wineries will follow suit because I think it has improved our ability to provide excellent service not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone.” **WBM**



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