

Organic Oregon

Text and photo: Claes Löfgren

In Oregon, pinot noir is king, and it almost feels like being in Burgundy. Not least because some of the leading French wineries have established themselves in this dynamic wine state that echoes in a double sense. Welcome to Oregon.

It feels homely in Oregon with its forests between the vineyards. We are at the 45th parallel which gives 15 hours of daylight during the growing season.

Grapes were planted in Oregon as far back as the 1850s, but it was a number of young pioneers who started the modern wine industry in the 1960s.

David Lett was the first to plant pinot noir in the Willamette Valley. He studied at UC Davis, the leading school for aspiring winemakers in the US. David was drawn to pinot noir, but his teachers said it was too hot in California and too wet in Oregon for good quality. But he did some research and saw northern Portugal or the South Island of New Zealand as a possibility. Or Oregon!

Lett travelled there and was convinced, this was the best option! Mostly Christmas trees and fruit were grown here, but the land was cheap and the conditions were good.

The northern location gives long days and lots of sun during the season, cool nights give acidity and balance. The combination produces ripe grapes with elegance and developed grape character.

The Washington vineyards are in the dry and warm shadow of the Cascade Mountains, while the Willamette Valley is protected only by the much lower Coastal Range. An important factor is the Van Deuzer Corridor, which brings cool winds in the afternoons from the Pacific Ocean and is the only passage through the mountains.

Fortunately, the big rains come in the winter, the summer months are usually dry so no irrigation is needed here.

The Letts named the property Eyrie after the eagle's nest high up in a tree in the vineyard.

More families followed, Charles Cory, Ponzis, Dick Erath, Sokol Blosser and Adelsheim to name a few of the most important.

They were described as hippies, but most were well-educated and driven by curiosity and discovery. There was no competition between the vineyards, they helped each other. They shared a passion for wine as one big family.

David Letts' Eyrie Pinot Noir opened the eyes of the world to Oregon.

An American friend in Burgundy thought Lett should enter his wine in the 1979 Paris Wine Olympics. The wine sensationally came third among the pinot noir wines and the wine world was amazed.

Burgundy grower Robert Drouhin organised another round in Beaune the following year and the wine came second. Mr Drouhin sent his daughter Veronique to intern with some of the founding families and in 1987 they bought 90 hectares in the Dundee Hills.

Success was immediate and today they have bought a further 113 hectares in the Eola-Amity Hills. This was the beginning of the French influence in Oregon, which I will come to later.

The settlers wanted to protect themselves from exploitation and managed to convince the authorities that the land was too valuable to farm, especially up in the hills.

Another issue that united the early winegrowers was ecology and the environment. From the start, most of them focused entirely on organic viticulture, and today it is more or less dominant, with slightly different certifications. Most common is LIVE followed by Demeter. The number of biodynamic vineyards is probably larger than in any other wine region in the world, although many choose not to certify.

The winemakers also came together to form what became the Oregon Wine Board, to support joint marketing events around the US and the world.

Another important event was the film *Sideways*, released in 2004. Although it was set in Santa Barbara, it had an impact here, suddenly everyone wanted to buy pinot wines!

It's not just pinot noir that is grown, we should point out. Chardonnay is growing rapidly as French influences spread. Here, too, the finest Burgundies stand as models of elegance and restrained barrel handling, far removed from the neighbour to the south who likes to flaunt the oak. Pinot gris is mostly planted with white wine grapes and riesling is also popular. Now there is also a lot of talk about Syrah and Gamay as upcoming grapes.

The first vineyard owners agreed that the soil in the valleys was too fertile and that the vines would thrive best on the slopes where the soil on the hills was a mixture of volcanic basalt, marine sediments and loess soil, the three soils that characterise Oregon's terroir, created by geological phenomena over millions of years.

The first logs planted were on their own roots, but as phylloxera began to spread, virtually all new plantings in the last twenty years have been on grafted roots.

Towards Hood River

I left Washington in Walla Walla and drove over to Oregon. Walla Walla is an AVA shared by the two states, so a lot of the fruit grown on the Oregon side is trucked over to producers on the other side of the state line. The sub-district of Walla Walla on the Oregon side is called The Rocks of Milton-Freewater and is fantastic as the vineyards are on old river beds with fist-sized rocks. Perfect for syrah which is the most popular grape here. I continue along the Columbia River which is one of the most beautiful areas you can visit with dramatic cliffs plunging steeply down from the river. Created by the famous Missoula River, it was formed 20,000 years ago when the Ice Age ended and the waters broke through ice walls, carrying rocks and layers of soil created by volcanic eruptions. I stopped in Hood River, a popular tourist area and also a great wine region. The Columbia Gorge AVA was created in 2004 and consists of just over 400 hectares on the Oregon side. What makes the Columbia Gorge special is the winds that come from the Pacific Ocean through the Cascade Mountains and bring coolness. The vineyards are high up with spectacular views of the 3500 metre high Mount Hood volcano.

The first visit of the day was to Phelps Creek, owned by Bob Morus and Lynette Bars-Morus. Bob is a retired airline captain and dreamed of having his own vineyard when he retired. He was tipped off about Phelps Creek and travelled there with a broker. The weather was quite hazy and cloudy but he decided to buy on the spot. It was only when he came back as an owner that he saw the amazing view of Mount Hood!

They make 5000 cases of pinot noir, pinot gris and chardonnay assisted by Alexandrine Roy from Burgundy, who comes a couple of times a year. The daily work in the winery is led by Catarina Simoes from Portugal. The wines are consistently good looking at affordable prices. Phelps Creek is the first winery I have visited that has a family of bears living on the property!

Two hours drive later and a stop in the middle of Portland's trendy neighbourhood. Division Winemaking Company is an urban winery that makes 10,000 cases of wine from oddball grapes like chenin blanc, aligoté, gamay and sangiovese. They clearly represent a new generation of winemakers who think outside the box and make the wines they want to drink.

The nobleman's calendar

The rest of the week was spent in the Willamette Valley with McMinnville as my base camp. Visiting were a number of the original pioneers and some of the newcomers who were more than happy to tell me about the beginnings of Oregon wines. Not all of the originals are still around, but David

Adelsheim is a living legend who is still driving the development of Oregon's quality wines. Adelsheim soon became friends with David Lett and Dick Erath and received good advice. He travelled to Burgundy and studied there, making sure they got the right clones of the grapes for Oregon.

He made his first wine in 1978 and says it was a long learning curve. After hiring a winemaker in 1988, the quality really took off. With great energy, David sets out to explain the different soils of the Willamette Valley and why he has fought so hard to get the valley divided into different sub-AVAs to show the differences between the wines. Today, there are ten of them and Adelsheim vineyards are in the Chehelem Mountains AVA. Adelsheim's wines are highly sought after thanks in large part to winemaker Gina Hennen.

Dick and Nancy Ponzi were also among the first to establish themselves and became part of the first ten families. I visited them twenty years ago, when they were a fairly small winery and their daughter Luisa Ponzi had taken over as winemaker. The wines were brilliant then and even better now when I make a return visit. Now I am greeted by a fantastic facility with a restaurant and tasting room.

Since 2021, the French champagne group Bollinger is the owner, but Luisa is still responsible for the wines. Luisa Ponzi is also the president of LIVE, the organisation that certifies organic and sustainable viticulture in the Pacific Northwest.

Susan and Bill Sokol-Blosser planted their vines in the early seventies and have become known as one of the top producers. They were the first to build a tasting room for visitors and today they have a fantastic facility with very high standards of cuisine. Their son Alex Sokol-Blosser is the CEO of the company and the wines appear in Sweden on a regular basis.

Pat and Joe Campbell started Elk Cove in 1974 high up in the mountains in what is called the Coastal Range Mountains. There was almost nothing here, but the land was cheap and they believed in their instincts. They lived in a caravan and the existing barn became a winery when the first grapes started to grow.

When a family of deer camped on the hillside above them, they decided that Elk Grove would be the name of the wine. Joe, who was trained as a doctor, worked nights in the emergency room and laboured in the vineyard during the day. Thanks to the support of the other pioneers, he learnt the craft and started making wine.

His son Adam is now the head winemaker and the person I meet on my visit is his daughter Anna who, as well as being a trained photographer, is also in charge of the company's PR and design. Their other company is Pike Road, which makes wine from purchased grapes from some of the best vineyards around the Willamette Valley.

A very good wine that we see at the Company on a regular basis.

Ken Wright is a legend in Oregon and one of the top winemakers. He arrived from California in 1986 with his family and ten barrels of wine on a trailer. It was to be his start-up capital, but it almost ended in disaster when the law didn't allow unfinned wine to be transported across the state border. It worked out and today Ken Wright Cellars is located in the small town of Carlton. He has bought the disused station house and turned it into a charming tasting room.

We have lunch together and he apologises because he has his grandchildren with him. Ken Wright's wines get consistently high scores and he has become something of an ambassador for the new Oregon.

We talk about the devastating fires that destroyed the harvest for many in 2020. Ken Wright buys a lot of grapes with long contracts from growers.

- 'I honoured all the contracts, I depend on the grape growers. If they go bankrupt, I suffer too,' he says. 'Many didn't make any wine, but I still managed to make quite a few, many of which scored highly.'

Dick Erath became very successful and built his wine brand in a skilful way. He got good distribution in restaurants, wine shops and grocery stores. In 2006, when Washington's largest producer, Ste Michelle Estates, became interested in getting into Oregon and pinot noir, he got an offer he couldn't refuse. The company also bought A to Z in 2021, so now they are the biggest in both Washington and Oregon. Young and promising winemaker Leah Adint has taken over from winemaker Gary Horner and her first vintage is out now. Erath pinot noir 2021 is available on the Order range and is, for the price, a bargain I would say. Oregon wines are not cheap, here we have a good example that delivers at a reasonable price. In total, Erath and A to Z produce an incomprehensible 700,000 cases!

Union Wine Company is another giant going its own way, namely wine in cans with the Underwood brand. A trend we see coming more and more. You can think what you want about it, but the market decides.

Biodynamically certified King Estate is also one of the giants with 150,000 cases, an achievement in my eyes. Significantly smaller are biodynamic Cristom with winemaker Daniel Estrin and Brooks with Chris Williams, both with exciting stories to tell and good wines, but the space is not enough.

The French influence

We have previously described the French influences in Oregon. Drouhin in Dundee was first, and was a must visit. A lot had happened in twenty years, I realised. The terrace was full with visitors tasting the wines. In the vineyard there was activity with preparations for the harvest that was a few weeks away. The wines are excellent and a new acquaintance was Roserock from Eola-Amity. The wines from there are made with the same care and should not be seen as a second wine. They simply wanted to make more wine and from a different terroir.

So what is the difference between Burgundy and Oregon pinot noir wines?

Veronique Drouhin has put it this way;

- The Oregon wines have a little darker fruit and a lovely spiciness. The challenge here is to make them elegant. In Burgundy, the wines of the best vineyards are almost always elegant, but there the challenge is to make elegant wines with some weight. The combination of the two would be perfect!

Dominique Lafon belongs to one of the most distinguished winemaking families in Burgundy, and was lured to Oregon in 2007 for the Evening Land project started by film director Mark Tarlov. He first made wines in California and then bought the Seven Springs vineyard in Eola-Amity. Planted in 1984, it's considered one of the Willamette Valley's best. As a consultant, Lafon worked with Master Sommelier Larry Stone as a partner and together they established a reputation for making some of Oregon's best chardonnay and pinot noir wines. Perhaps mainly because they harvested earlier than others. The winemaker was Isabelle Meunier, also from France. They left Evening Land in 2011, the economy had, despite the wines being good, totally collapsed and the radar couple Sashi Moorman and Raj Parr from California took over.

Today, Evening Land with Seven Springs Vineyard is very prosperous under Moorman/Parr's management. I visited them and was welcomed by Kevin Goldsmith who is part of the team. Their winemaker Damien Lapuyade had just left, I met him the next day at Beaux Freres. We walk through the vineyard, which is planted in different rounds and with different clones. The older parts have been affected by phylloxera and are gradually replanted. They still sell some grapes, just to friends, but the majority is used in the small production of 10-13,000 cases.

- 'We didn't make any red wine in 2020,' says Sashi. 'Those who had contracts for grapes had to pay half the price. If they didn't want to, we haven't sold anything to them since. We haven't seen the full extent of this yet. The wines that were made anyway may show defects years later.'

Sashi Moorman splits his time between Oregon and Santa Barbara, where he and Raj Parr make cult

wines that are highly sought after.

Larry Stone and Dominique Lafon moved across the road and started Lingua Franca. Stone had invested all his retirement money in 2012 and bought land that he judged to be as good or better than Seven Springs. French winemaker Thomas Savre had worked with Isabelle Meunier and Lafon and was put in charge of day-to-day operations. They had great success with their wines, but were hit by the double whammy in 2020 when the Covid pandemic closed all restaurants in the United States and on that the big forest fires. The timing was the worst possible, the grapes were almost ripe and ready to be harvested. The white wine grapes fared reasonably well, but for their pinot noir it was a disaster.

It was clear that they needed to raise new money and when the giant Constellation showed interest, they sold the whole business. Everyone is still working but the economy has been saved and a brand new tasting room has been built to finally welcome visitors. Lingua Franca was a centre for homeless winemakers with big ambitions to produce their wines. This ended overnight with the sale.

The Jadot winery in Burgundy had jealously watched Drouhin's success and decided to get in on the action. They bought the Résonance vineyard in the Dundee Hills, which they saw as having fantastic potential. A lot of work has gone into the vineyard and visitor centre. The vinification facility is lightweight and built on three levels so all movement of grapes and must is by gravity. Jadot's head winemaker Jacques Lardière retired in 2012 after 42 years and didn't feel finished yet. He found Resonance and convinced the owners that this was a good idea.

Guillaume Large has been involved from the start and is responsible for the day-to-day running and they work closely together during harvest and winemaking. Elegant and stylish wines, Oregon with French finesse!

Beaux Frères sounds French but was started by Mike Etzel in Ribbon Ridge 34 years ago. He had no money, but his sister and brother-in-law joined as co-owners. The brother-in-law happened to be Robert Parker and became a world-famous wine critic. This was good and bad. Beaux Frères became famous, good, but Parker could never mention and judge the wines in public, bad. Now Mike happened to be a great viticulturist and winemaker so the wines became hugely sought after anyway. One of the first fully biodynamically farmed wineries in Oregon and an unpretentiousness that remains when I visit them again. Everything looks exactly the same as it did twenty years ago. The biggest difference is that now it is the son Mikey who is at the helm. When I visit, the first grapes of the year have arrived, early harvested chardonnay. The whole team is gathered to handle the grapes that go straight into the press after destemming. Dad Mike drops by, he is far from retired, but has started a new company, Sequitur and Etzel Farm Winery where other winemakers can hire themselves. The money for this came when Robert Parker wanted to be bought out of his part of Beaux Frères. It was the champagne company Henriot that bought 90% of the firm, which after a number of twists and turns is now owned by Artémis, headed by billionaire Francois Pinault. The wines are better than ever!