

Oregon Wine Matures

by Katherine Cole

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First, a pronunciation guide. The west-coast American state noted for its snow-capped mountains, wild rivers, thick forests, offbeat zeitgeist, hand-farmed vineyards and profound wines is pronounced OH-reh-gun. As in: "Once homespun, Oregon wine is now a rising sun, with megaton wattage." And our foremost AVA (American Viticultural Area) is the will-AM-it Valley. As in: "It's the Willamette, dammit!"

And now for some history: Although Oregon viticulture can be traced back to the covered-wagon pioneers of the mid 19th century, the industry truly took off circa 1970, when a gang of terroir-driven young visionaries identified the cool climate and diverse soils of the Willamette Valley, in particular, as ideal for Burgundian grape varieties.

The most notable names from this era—Adelsheim Vineyard, Elk Cove Vineyards, Erath, The Eyrie Vineyards, Ponzi Vineyards and Sokol-Blosser Winery—continue to produce fine wine today in the Willamette Valley, where 70% of Oregon's vineyard land is located.

These forerunners shared a credo that continues to persist to this day. They were fierce defenders of our environment. They were Burgundy-obsessed. And they were endlessly curious. Ambitious about what Oregon could achieve as a whole, they collaboratively pushed a relatively young New World region into the ranks of the world's finest in a matter of decades.

Now home to a thousand brands, Oregon still produces just 1% of American wine while commanding a disproportionately high price per bottle and number of top critical scores. Pinot Noir—a fickle but ultimately rewarding grape—has led this drive, and still accounts for some 60% of all varieties grown in the state.

FRENCH SOUL, OREGON SOIL

When I covered wine for The Oregonian newspaper between 2002 and 2015, I was struck by the pervasive autodidacticism of our winemakers. Every cellar was running comparison trials, pitting fined and filtered wines against unfined and unfiltered ones, for example, or conventional yeast against spontaneous fermentation. They were selling single-sub-appellation wines, volcanic vs. sedimentary-soil wines, single-vineyard wines, single-row wines, and even single-clone wines. (Or, as I like to call them, "anti-cuvées.")

If anyone is to blame for our obsession with small-lot releases, it's Ken Wright. In 1986, when he founded Panther Creek Winery in McMinnville—and later, under his eponymous label, Ken Wright Cellars in Carlton—Wright established the vineyard-designate trend. He bought fruit by the acre rather than the ton, and more or less took ownership of each vineyard block he leased, carefully crafting each of his 13 single-vineyard releases from vine to bottle.

The original models for the baker's dozen of vineyard- and appellation-specific wines were, of course, the producers of Burgundy, with their many clos and crus. Our winemakers have always had their eyes on France, performing their countless experiments and trials with the hope of catching up. Never mind that Burgundy has two thousand years of winegrowing experience—a thousand of those focused on Pinot Noir—on us.

Our most notable Burgundian imports have been clones and people—not, to be clear, cloned people. Producers led by David Adelsheim (Adelsheim Vineyard) lobbied for the import of

Burgundian Chardonnay and Pinot Noir clones back in the 1970s and '80s. And in 1987, a group of Willamette Valley winemakers founded the International Pinot Noir Celebration, a three-day gathering of winemakers, members of the trade, and enthusiasts from around the world for tasting, touring, and talking. Over the years, the event has attracted Burgundian luminaries including the likes of Lalou Bize-Leroy and Aubert de Villaine.

In 1986, Véronique Drouhin arrived from Burgundy to work harvest in Oregon, and returned to establish Maison Joseph Drouhin's Oregon outpost the next year. And Domaine Drouhin Oregon's tagline—"French soul, Oregon soil"—has set the tone for Willamette Valley winemaking ever since. (Luisa Ponzi, of Ponzi Vineyards, and Josh Bergström, of Bergström Wines, both did their postgraduate work in Beaune, and might argue that if the soul is French, the heart is all Oregon.)

Dominique Lafon arrived in 2005 to launch Evening Land Vineyards, then moved on to Lingua Franca in 2015. Alexandrine Roy began consulting for Columbia Gorge producer Phelps Creek in 2007. In 2012, Jean-Nicolas Méo cofounded Nicolas-Jay, and Louis-Michel Liger-Belair arrived to launch Chapter 24 Vineyards, now known as Rose & Arrow. By 2013, Thibault Gagey and Jacques Lardière were here, as well, to kickstart Maison Louis Jadot's first wine project outside of Burgundy: Résonance.

In 2015, Domaine Serene reversed the trend by purchasing Château de la Créé in the Côte de Beaune; it's just a matter of time before Air France offers a Portland-to-Beaune nonstop flight. And our three most talented full-time Oregon winemakers are, arguably, Francophones Isabelle Meunier (Lavinea Wines and Aubaine), Tomas Savre (Lingua Franca), and Alban Debeaulieu (Abbott Claim). At this point, French is the third language of the Valley after English and Spanish.

SMALL-SCALE & SUSTAINABLE

Oregon has long been an international leader in sustainable, Biodynamic, "Ore-ganic" (as we like to put it), and climate-friendly practices, with about half our producers certified sustainable and countless others operating sustainably without certification. A full 30% of the world's B Corp wineries are located in Oregon—among them Sokol Blosser, which has earned a prestigious "Best for the World—Environment" B Corp commendation four times, and built the world's first barrel cellar to achieve LEED certification.

Our natural elements are amenable to hands-off farming. The Willamette Valley is a cool-climate wine region, with slightly lower average growing-season temperatures than Burgundy's. Our rainy winters and springs favor dry farming, while our dry sunny summers encourage full ripening. So—despite annual battles with gophers and powdery mildew—we're set up for viticultural success without the aid of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides. Case in point: The Willamette Valley's family-owned King Estate boasts the largest Demeter-certified Biodynamic vineyard in North America.

But while nature is a willing partner, our culture also nurtures our commitment to sustainability. Small, family-run farms are more likely to practice organic or sustainable viticulture, and Oregon wineries produce, on average, 5,000 cases of wine or fewer annually, on a vineyard of approximately 30 acres (12 hectares). By contrast, the average California winery produces 50,000 cases annually, on a vineyard that's 104 acres (42 hectares).

On our petite family estates, the winemaker is also the grower, harvesting by hand rather than machine. That is, we treat our grapes like pets, not livestock. Even in recent years, as

outside investments have expanded the industry, this boutique ethos—and the sustainable mindset that comes with it—has remained engrained.

WHAT'S NEXT: CHARDONNAY & CHAMPENOISE

The past decade has seen rapid investment in the Valley. In addition to our mentors and partners from France, we've caught the eyes of rainmakers based in California and Washington. Thankfully, these deep-pocketed newcomers have honored our values. Most notably, Jackson Family Wines, the California-based family-owned conglomerate best-known for Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay, runs its four Willamette Valley wineries (Gran Moraine, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars, WillaKenzie Estate, and Zena Crown Vineyard) with respect for the land and sensitivity to the local culture.

Also over the past decade, the rising star of Chardonnay has threatened to eclipse that of Pinot Noir, despite the fact that it accounts for less than a tenth of our vineyard plantings. 2012 marked the first year of the Oregon Chardonnay Celebration, an IPNC sibling event. Since then, Chardonnay prices have risen annually, as have the number of rave reviews from critics. Some of our most interesting Chards are from Morgen-Long, OO, Lingua Franca, Walter Scott, and Arterberry Maresh.

Where there are Pinot Noir and Chardonnay—and a bit of Pinot Meunier—there will, inevitably, be bubbles. Producers such as Soter, Argyle, and R. Stuart & Co. have been making excellent *méthode traditionnelle* wines here for decades. The trend really took off after the finishing facility Radiant Sparkling opened in 2014, providing every Oregon winery access to riddling and disgorgement.

And now, here come the champenoise. Maisons & Domaines Henriot purchased the Willamette Valley's Beaux Frères—famously cofounded by the influential wine critic Robert Parker Jr.—in 2017. And Bollinger acquired Ponzi in 2021. Both wineries remain focused on still wines, but it's just a matter of time before a French-owned *maison de bulles* opens its doors.

In the meantime, we're hatching our own 100% sparkling projects, including the fascinating boutique label Corollary; the Aubaine offshoot (in partnership with South Africa's Beck Family) Lytle-Barnett; and Domaine Willamette, a luxe Biodynamic sparkling estate owned by Oregon's largest winery, Willamette Valley Vineyards.

As I look to the next decade, I continue to be bullish about Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, proud of *Sour* precise, mineral-driven Chardonnays, and eagerly anticipating the next installment in our *méthode traditionnelle* story. (Knowing our winemakers, I'm sure someone is already running comparison trials of sparkling-appropriate clones, and bottling them as distinct *anti-cuvées*.)

All of which is to say that our industry is no longer the homespun operation it once was. We may be a collection of small family-owned estates, but we're also polished, poised, multilingual, and educated. Oregon wine is here for the long run.

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Katherine's bio

Katherine Cole is the James Beard Award-winning executive producer and host of [The Four Top](#), an international podcast focusing on hot-button topics in the wine world. She is also the author of five books on wine, including [Sparkling Wine Anytime](#). She was previously wine columnist for *The Oregonian* newspaper and a contributor to wine and lifestyle publications worldwide. She is currently communications director at [Vin Agency](#). A graduate of Harvard College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, Katherine is a member of the Circle of Wine Writers and has been named to the “Imbibe 75” list of “the people, places and flavors that will help shape the way we all drink.” In her spare time, Katherine is an avid hiker, skier, cyclist, and volunteer, contributing her time to causes such as [Portland Backpack](#), the James Beard Public Market, and the Portland chapter of [Les Dames d’Escoffier International](#).