

Oregon – Pinot paradise

The down-to-earth state might not seem the most obvious place for growing one of the world's most sensuous grapes, but **Tom Cannavan** finds Pinot Noir is a speciality

On her television Wine Course in the 1990s, Jancis Robinson discussed the red wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy and their mixed emotional messages: "If red Bordeaux's appeal is strictly above the neck, that of red Burgundy is something completely different ..."

There's no doubt that Burgundy's Pinot Noir is a downright sexy grape. Silky and seductive at its best, it is also tempestuous and somewhat unpredictable. Let's not go too far down the analogous route of mistresses and concubines, but suffice to say that, once smitten by the charms of Pinot Noir, many good men – and women – succumb.

The wild, wild west

Pinot Noir really does seem to get under the skin of both winemakers and consumers. Partly it is the thrill of the chase – of tracking down great examples from the relatively small world supply. Of the few New World regions associated with Pinot, Oregon is one that sets many Pinotphiles' hearts racing.

The 10th largest state of the US is as rugged and outdoorsy as they come. Oregon may sit just north of California on the west coast, but the sun-worshipping beautiful people will find the state's miles of pristine beach usually shrouded in fog and decidedly chilly. Inland, the craggy Cascade mountain range and its snow-capped volcanoes are carpeted in dense pine forests. In the no-nonsense farming country, vast fields of wheat and corn mean dungaree-clad farmers in pick-up trucks are more common than blondes in sports cars.



In some ways then, Oregon and Pinot Noir are odd bedfellows. But the reasons the world's most temperamental and sensuous grape has shackled up with one of the US's most down-to-earth states can be explained by several factors.

Geology

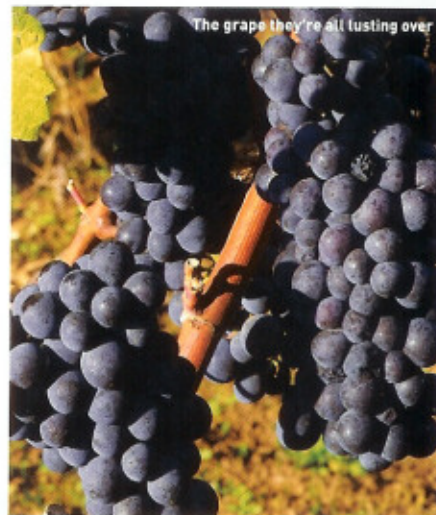
While Oregon may have precious little limestone – the Holy Grail of Pinot producers – the geology and soils of the region play a crucial role in Pinot's success. The epicentre of wine production is the Willamette Valley, where some 300 of the state's 400 producers ply their trade. Fifteen million years ago volcanic eruptions laid down a bedrock of basalt across the Willamette, but another catastrophic geological event around 15,000 years ago helped shape today's wine industry.

A giant ice wall that dammed Lake Missoula, an enormous body of water in Idaho, gave way. A huge flood swept across Washington and down the Columbia River Gorge, completely filling the Willamette Valley to a depth of 100m. The Missoula floods eventually subsided, leaving a 10m thickness of sediment below the flood line and a range of lean, basalt-based soils above. The reddish Jory soil is prized by top Pinot growers high on the Dundee Hills, while the free-draining Willakenzie soil is found in many other top vineyards.

The beginnings

Oregon's passion for Pinot reveals another side to the state itself. Oregon may be as wholesome as mom's apple pie, but it has a mile-wide liberal streak that makes it the only one of the 50 states to have enshrined a "right to die" in law, permitting physician-assisted euthanasia. It's also one of only two states where serving yourself in gas stations is illegal, to protect the jobs of pump attendants.

Though vines were first planted here in the 1850s, the modern industry dates from the hippy sixties and seems to personify Oregon's open-mindedness. More than 60 per cent of the region's vineyards are farmed organically, with many adopting biodynamic methods. Now in her sixties, Susan Sokol-Blosser of the Sokol-Blosser winery is more smart businesswoman than hippy earth-mother, but smiles to recall those flower-power beginnings: "It wasn't just vines we were planting back then ..."



That educated, inquisitive generation recognised that Pinot Noir was both suited to the region and to its sophisticated, worldly palate. The second generation is now gradually taking over, and they have grown up with Pinot coursing through their veins. Every winemaker I spoke to had a personal passion for Burgundy, so maybe the marriage of Pinot and Oregon is not so contradictory after all.

The producers

Perhaps the greatest endorsement of Oregon's Pinot credentials has been the interest shown in the area by some of Burgundy's biggest names. Since 1988 Joseph Drouhin's Oregon outpost, Domaine Drouhin, has been producing sublime Pinots under the guidance of Veronique Drouhin. But Dominique Lafon has set up shop here recently, too, and will be making 5,000 cases of top-end Pinot to appear under the Evening Land label, almost certainly sold directly to restaurants and a mailing list.

Home-grown investors are also keen to cash in on the burgeoning fame – and prices – of Oregon Pinot. In the south of the Willamette Valley, the Olsen family operates a large grass seed business. But tracts of their grassland are now being converted to grape growing. Around 101ha are planted, and I visited a vast site called Mulkey Hill where planting has just begun, with a target to reach 121ha over the next two years. There are also plans to build a winery, hotel, restaurant and golf course in a

Susan Sekot-Blosser is more businesswoman than earth-mother, but remembers the hippy days that started Oregon's modern wine scene



hugely ambitious investment that could make Olsen Family Vineyards the biggest player in Oregon. Their first releases under the Viridian label – 2006 vintage wines from blended estate and purchased fruit – are underwhelming, but this is clearly a player on the Oregon scene that's worth watching.

The bulk of production in Oregon is in the hands of small, family producers. Some make only a few thousand cases and use custom crushing facilities in the absence of their own wineries. A good example is another new kid on the block, Atticus. Husband and wife team Guy Insley and Ximena Orrego left Florida in search of a new life out of high-tech industry and into winemaking. They looked everywhere from New Zealand to Portugal before settling on Oregon, largely because of their love for Pinot Noir. While Guy continues to pay the bills through his day job, Ximena has been studying winemaking and working as a cellar rat.

In 2007 they produced just 500 cases, but are on their way to a targeted 5,000. Their 2006 Select Pinot Noir is tight and muscular, but has a rich, sweet palate and silky complexity.

One of the most intriguing estates I visited is Sineann, where winemaker and owner Peter Rosback runs a super-négociant operation, making wines not only from Oregon fruit, but also from New Zealand, Washington State and the Napa Valley. Rosback must clock-up a shed-load of air miles. All the wines are bottled under the glass VinoLock system, and the

winemaking is absolutely meticulous, whether a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, Washington Gewürztraminer or Oregon Pinot Noir. The 2006 Wyeast Vineyard Pinot Noir is suffused with coffee and tobacco over lush black fruit balanced by velvety tannins.

Two other operations producing high-quality biodynamic wines are Beaux Frères and Bergström. Beaux Frères is co-owned by Robert Parker and his brother-in-law, winemaker Mike Etzel. Etzel admits the Parker connection is both a blessing and a curse when it comes to selling the wines, but there's no shortage of buyers for their Burgundian, hand-crafted Pinot Noirs. The 2006 estate wine displays herbal edges to cherry fruit, with a tang of orangy acidity in the finish.

Josh Bergström makes a range of wines that is impressive at every level. His Dr Bergström Riesling is glittering stuff in a Mosel style, but Pinot is the real focus here. Oregon has begun to declare individual AVAs (like French appellation contrôlée districts), but Bergström is not a great believer in them: "They are not really based on soil as in Burgundy," he says, "but more on geography and politics – no one is going to kick their neighbour out of an AVA just because they have the wrong soil type."

Oregon in the UK

Oregon wines are still as rare as hens' teeth on UK shelves. I spoke to Jasper Morris, buyer at Berry Bros & Rudd, who had just returned

Ones to watch

There are some interesting names currently without a UK presence:

Atticus (atticuswine.com)
Chehalem (chehalemwines.com)
Evening Land (elwines.com)
Rex Hill (rexhill.com)
Scott Paul (scottspaul.com)
Sineann (sineann.com)
Viridian (viridianwines.com)
Witness Tree (witnessreevineyard.com)

from the region, and asked him why that was. "Volumes produced are still remarkably small on a global scale," he says. "The Pacific North West economy can eat up whatever is produced."

However, Morris is also aware of the region's potential: "Prices do look quite high from the UK perspective, but it is not greed on the part of the producers, just local reality."

"It may look different in another generation, when the best sites have been clearly identified and the vines have had time to reach greater maturity."

Oregon's Pinots are impressive. They are also expensive, but there's a soul to these wines that not all Pinot regions can muster. With only 40 years of Pinot Noir history behind them, there is also huge potential.