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The Oregon trail, part II

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go to [part I](#)

the wine producers, continued

Bergström

One of the most impressive visits of my tour was to Bergström, where winemaker Josh Bergström conducted a tasting of beautiful Riesling and a range of gorgeous vineyard-designated Pinots. 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."



A few people I'd spoken to before my trip had pin-pointed Bergström as one of the best estates of the Willamette, but commented that their Pinots were rather big, dense wines. I have to say that was not the case on the evidence of my tastings, though perhaps the wine style has changed. Certainly, Josh Bergström told me "Oregon is about focused, fresh fruit flavours - not into plums and raisins." Some of Josh's vines are 45 years old, and he also buys fruit from long term-growers, with Josh managing the vineyards. He is gradually persuading the owners to switch to organic if not Biodynamic farming.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on five wines from Bergström

Range tasting for a fee of \$25, by appointment only. Tel: 503 554 0468.

Beaux Frères

Not far from Bergström sits the low-key Beaux Frères, a relatively small estate possibly most famous because it is a partnership between winemaker Mike Etzel and his brother-in-law, American wine writer Robert Parker. Don't blink or you'll miss the entrance, and visits are strictly by appointment to a bustling working winery where Mike farms biodynamically and has plenty of strong opinions. He persists with a block of Grenache, despite the difficulties in ripening this variety in the relative cool of the

FEATURES

Willamette, and says that Parker's name is "both a blessing and a curse when it comes to selling the wines," but certainly there's no shortage of buyers for their very Burgundian, hand-crafted Pinot Noirs.



Mike regards the Willamette as perfect Pinot Noir country, and an ideal climate for biodynamic farming: "Unlike Burgundy we have a dry summer and healthier fruit, but unlike California we have cooler conditions and higher natural acidity. We also have a group of focused winemakers, all trying to make a statement through their product." There was only one wine available for tasting on my visit, from the two or three cuvées they normally produce:

Beaux Frères Beaux Frères Vineyard Pinot Noir 2006

Very refined, subtle nose, with nice herbal edges to cherry fruit. Very nice ripe tannins, with good acidity and a slick of black fruit set against tight, muscular tannins and an orangy tang of acidity. 91/100. See all stockists on [wine-searcher.com](http://www.wine-searcher.com)

Lemelson Vineyards

I really enjoyed my visit to Lemelson, where winemaker Anthony King (right) and I shared a sandwich lunch before touring the winery and tasting through their range. Anthony began his career in a slightly unorthodox way, planting Rhône varietals in central Texas. A decision to make winemaking his career saw him gain a Masters degree in oenology and viticulture from University of California Davis, where his research focused on the effects of vineyard and winery practices on Pinot Noir color and tannin. After making wines at Acacia Vineyards in Carneros, he moved to Lemelson to take over from the departing Paul Pujol, who'd started his career with Kuentz Bas in Alsace.



The fascinating winery works entirely by gravity flow, aided by this one-of-a-kind, mobile stainless steel sorting platform which sits on four massive steel legs and moves along the winery on a track. Sorting tables on top allow Anthony to select only the ripest clusters to fill each stainless steel fermenter. Steel 'wine lines' allow wine to fall from here and run throughout the building, minimising the need for plastic hoses. Only French oak barrels are used here, and the environmentally sustainable building is constructed from certified local lumber with all floors made from Oregon white oak harvested on the winery property.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 10 wines from Lemelson Vineyards

Tastings daily, but by appointment only. Tel: 503 852 6619

Amity Vineyards

One of the great characters and originators of the modern-day Oregon wine scene is Myron Redford. We'd met a few days before my visit to his Yamhill winery when we had dinner with other Willamette 'founders', and drank some fantastic Pinot of his from the 1970s. Myron purchased the property in 1974, and in his time has been the first person to make an organic wine in Oregon, the first to make a sulphite-free wine, and his determination to make natural wines even led to him stop using new oak in 1988. However he tells me that his assistant winemaker Darcy Pendergrass asked permission to buy some new barrels when she took over day-to-day winemaking in 2005, so now there's a tiny percentage of new oak for her to play with.



It was a huge pleasure to spend an afternoon wandering the vineyards with Myron, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Willamette. His ramshackle winery is enormously popular with tourists, and you will often find Myron behind the tasting bar enthusing about his 35-year-old passion. Amity's reputation has had its ups and downs over the years, but there are some really good wines here. A living slice of Oregon wine history.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 11 wines from Amity Vineyards

Tastings daily. Tel: 503 835 2362

Four Graces

Driving between the towns of Newberg and Dundee means you will pass by The Four Graces, a welcoming and easily accessible winery just off of highway 99W that is open daily and has a picnic area with an open fire in the winter months.

I met up with Anthony Van Nice (right) who is in charge of winemaking and vineyard management, and who explained the winery was named after the four daughters of owners Steve and Paula Black. We took a drive up to the highest point in their Dundee Hills vineyard, to see the basaltic iron-rich Jory soils supporting Pinot Noir from older Pommard, and more recent Dijon clones, and Pinot Gris and Blanc using clonal material from Alsace. A second 40-acre vineyard in the Yamhill area is planted to Pinot Noir, half of it farmed biodynamically.

Anthony is enthusiastic about the sometimes marginal climate in Oregon, describing it as "genuine terroir-driven grape growing on the edge of viability." He says that makes it exciting, and draws an analogy with weather forecasting: "who's got the most interesting job, the weatherman in Arizona, or the weatherman in Oregon?".



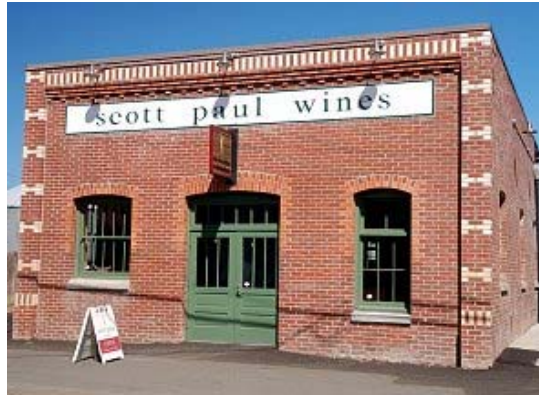
He uses only French oak for his wines, mostly from Burgundian tonnelier François Frères, and says Oregon could be seen as in the stylistic centre between California and Burgundy.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on four wines from The Four Graces

Open daily. Tel: 0800 245 2950

Scott Paul Wines

Another fairly unusual operation is Scott Paul Wines. Owner Scott Wright imports from 15 Burgundy estates and is a self-confessed "Burgundy fanatic," who spends several weeks there every year. He says he is "Trying to make people comfortable with Burgundy," through sales, tastings and educational programmes in his facility in the centre of the town of Carlton. As far as his own Oregon wines go, it is a boutique operation focused on Pinot Noir and producing just 4,000 - 5,000 cases annually. Scott Paul Wines started in 1999, but the first two vintages were made in California before Oregon's cool climate and Pinot reputation pulled them north.



Scott says the house style is to tone back on oak and extraction, and aim for a much fresher style of wine that compliments modern styles of food. Three cuvées are produced.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on three wines from Scott Paul

Tasting room open: January - February, Saturdays only; March - December, Friday - Sunday.
Tel: 503 852 7300

Cristom Vineyards

Steve Doerner, winemaker at Cristom, took me for a walk - more of a hike really - up to the top of the steep Jessie vineyard, for panoramic views over the valley and to the snow-capped Mount Jefferson. The Cristom story began in 1991, when owner Paul Gerrie visited the International Pinot Celebration in Oregon. He decided the time was right to leave the East Coast, and re-established his family in Oregon to pursue a winemaking dream. Eight vineyard sites are spread around the Eola Hills in the southern part of the Willamette, all dry farmed. One block is planted with Syrah which, in a renowned Pinot Noir region, must be regarded as somewhat ambitious. Yet Steve is pleased with the results so far.



Grown in its own vineyard in the warmest part of the estate, Steve's first Syrah vintage was 2003, the year of a record heatwave, but if those high average temperatures recorded by Chehalem (part I) persist, then who knows what the future might hold for Willamette Syrah? Steve is also a trained scientist and has a no-nonsense approach to making wine, that includes trusting those around him to do their jobs properly: "Let the cooper do his job," he tells me for example, "don't specify anything about toast or forest, just say 'give me your best barrels' - they are the specialist in their field."

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on nine wines from Cristom

Tasting room open: April - Thanksgiving, Tuesday - Sunday; December - March by appointment only. \$5 tasting fee refundable with a purchase. Tel: 503 375 3068

Firesteed

I'd guess that Firesteed is one of the better-

known names of Oregon wine in the UK, as their moderately-priced Pinot Noir has been on the shelves of some major UK retailers for many years and is widely available through independent merchants. In that time Firesteed has become known as a 'Virtual Winery', as in fact it was a négociant operation that bought-in fruit and made wine in rented space in other wineries. The acquisition of Flynn Vineyards in 2003 brought with it premises, where I met winemaker Bryan Croft (right) at the company's non-nonsense facility in the Eola Hills. We tasted widely from barrel then settled down for a more formal range tasting on the deck in front of the winery.



Sadly, an unexpected cloudburst sent us scrambling to scoop up bottles, glasses and my laptop, and somehow the bulk of my notes were lost in the mêlée. Reviews of a couple of wines survived, but hopefully I can catch up with Firesteed's wines again some time soon.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on two wines from Firesteed

Tasting room open daily, but by appointment only. Tel: 503 623 8683

Witness Tree Vineyard

Also in the Eola Hills, Witness Tree takes its name from an ancient, gnarled oak that bears a Witness Mark. The surveyors who marked out Land Claims in the Oregon Trail era sought natural landmarks such as trees on which to mark their boundaries. In 1854, the Witness Tree marked the Northwest corner of Land Claim No. 51, and stands to this day high on the vineyard slope. I took a bumpy ride on a small tractor up to the tree with winemaker and vineyard manager Steve Westby (right). It also let us see new plantings way up on the ridge at slightly over 600 feet. This estate operation uses only its own fruit, and Pinot Noir is the main focus with some Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Viognier too making dry and dessert wines.



[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 10 wines from Witness Tree

Tasting room open: May - October, Tuesday - Sunday; November - December, Saturday and Sunday; January & February open only on Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend. Tel: 503 585 7874

Viridian Wines

Perhaps the greatest endorsement of Oregon's Pinot credentials has been the interest shown in the area by some of Burgundy's biggest names. Joseph Drouhin of course, but Dominique Lafon has set up shop recently too, and will be making 5,000 cases of Pinot under the Evening Land label. 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

operate a large grass seed business. But tracts of their grass land are now being converted to grape growing. Certain hillsides have been identified as having excellent Willakenzie and Jury's Soils. Vineyard manager Dean Underwood (right) took me to a vast site called Mulkey Hill where planting is in process.



There are also plans to build a winery, hotel, restaurant and golf course in a hugely ambitious investment that could make Olsen Family Vineyards the biggest player in Oregon with 150,000 cases annually. To be perfectly honest, their first releases - 2006 vintage wines from blended estate and purchased fruit - are underwhelming, but these are low-priced wines for Oregon at around \$15. A name that's worth watching.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on three wines from Viridian

No visitor facilities as yet (January 2009). Tel: 503 838 2022

Willamette Valley Vineyards

My extensive tour of the Willamette ended at Willamette Valley Vineyards, one of the biggest names of the area having been established in 1983. I'd had dinner with founder Jim Bernau a few days before, but was delighted to meet up with national Sales Director Cara Pepper Day for a tasting at their large facility with excellent visitor facilities just south of the town of Salem. There are 50 acres of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris here, which are certified organic. The Tualatin vineyard, established in 1973, is one of the oldest in the Willamette and is certified as being farmed using sustainable practices. As well as Pinot and Chardonnay, aromatic varieties like Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Muscat thrive here.



Jim Bernau is a determined character. Using a small tractor, he cleared away the blackberry bushes and plum orchards in 1983 to begin planting Pinot Noir. Today he still lives on the vineyard and is the company's President, but in fact Willamette Valley Vineyards is owned by 4,500 wine enthusiast shareholders. It is basically a consumer-owned winery, and Jim's contribution has earned him the wine industry's Outstanding Service Award. Recently, he also received the Founder's Award for his work on establishing the Oregon Wine Board.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on eight wines from Willamette Valley Vineyards

Tasting room open daily, tours by arrangement. Tel: 503 588 9463

Summing up

Overall I was really impressed by Oregon's Pinots Noir, which exhibit lovely fruit and a real sense of place. But watch out for Riesling too: there are some terrific examples from the off-dry German style, to lime-streaked dry wines.

It is also a fantastic place to visit I must say, with wonderfully contrasting scenery from the coast, through the farming belt, to the snow-capped mountains. Below are some food and lodging recommendations for the Willamette Valley and further afield.

Willamette Valley Hotels

Brookside Inn

8243 NW Abbey Road
Carlton, Oregon 97111
00 1 503 852 4433

Doubles from \$185. Dreamy, nine-bedroom B&B in an idyllic setting, with comfortable and chic contemporary bedrooms and fabulous breakfasts. Charming and knowledgeable hosts. Highly recommended.

The Dundee Manor

8380 NE Worden Hill Rd
Dundee, OR 97115
00 1 503 554 1945

Doubles from \$175. Knick-knack-filled B&B in the heart of prime Pinot country, with sociable hosts and well-appointed bedrooms. Note that en-suite rooms start at \$225.

Hotel Oregon

310 N.E. Evans Street
McMinnville, OR 97128
00 1 503 472 8427

Doubles from \$50. A slice of whimsical theatre in the middle of a pretty wine country town, pay an extra \$50 for a King Suite with private bath and enjoy the wild west atmosphere.

Willamette Valley Restaurants

The Painted Lady

201 S. College
Newberg, OR 97132
00 1 503 538 3850

Undoubtedly the Willamette's most sophisticated food, served in a charming Victorian house, and spotlighting local, seasonal produce.

The Dundee Bistro

100-A SW Seventh Street
Dundee, OR 97115
00 1 503 554 1650

A casual and buzzing bistro and adjoining wine bar, with healthy portions of high-quality comfort food. Local produce features extensively.

Nick's Italian Café

521 NE 3rd St
McMinnville, OR 97128
00 1 503 434 4471

An institution in the pretty old town of McMinnville, almost everyone opts for the five-course, fixed-priced menu, though a la carte is also available.

Side trips from the Willamette Valley

Portland

There's much to see and do in the laid-back and attractive city of Portland, from Japanese gardens and a Science museum, to some world class shopping. Handily, Oregon has no sales tax, so goods are around 8% cheaper than in neighbouring states. Stay at the quirky but deluxe [Vintage Plaza](#) hotel and eat in the wonderful [Paley's Place](#), for stunning seasonal food sourced from local organic suppliers.

The Coast

Though often shrouded in a cooling fog, the miles of unspoiled coast is perfect beachcombing and surfing territory. The city of Lincoln is only one hour from the Willamette, and offers the recently renovated [Surftides](#), a large hotel that's been given a boutique-ish makeover, and the [Bay House](#), a fine dining restaurant with serious cuisine and a massive and impressive wine list.

The Columbia Gorge

One of the great drives, heading east from Portland hugging the dramatic valley and river that creates the border between Oregon and Washington, the journey takes in some spectacular close-up views of Mt Hood. The Dalles is a decent town in which to overnight on the eastern end of the trip, with numerous mid-market hotel options and some pretty good Italian food in [Romul's](#) restaurant.

Go to part I: [Oregon history and geography plus profiles of six wineries](#)

[▲ TOP OF PAGE](#)

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