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## On the Oregon trail

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On her television Wine Course broadcast 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 it to say that once smitten by the charms of Pinot Noir, many good men - and women - succumb.

Of the few New World regions associated with Pinot, Oregon is one that sets many Pinotphiles' hearts racing. But before I eulogise about Oregon, its grandeur and its diversity, I think I'd better tell you where it is. A straw poll of friends brought forth suggestions from America's mid-west to "somewhere close to Boston?" In fact Oregon, the 10th largest of the United States, lies on the Pacific coast immediately north of California.

Oregon is as rugged and out-doorsy as they come. Indeed, the sun-worshipping beautiful people of California would 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, corn and grassland mean dungaree-clad farmers in pick-up trucks are much more common than beautiful blondes in sexy little sports cars.

Most visitors will arrive into Oregon's gateway city, Portland. Portland's 2.2 million inhabitants enjoy the only taste of city-slicker lifestyle on offer in a state with a total population of only 3.7 million.

There's a plentiful supply of quality hotels, destination restaurants and - joy of joys - a thriving downtown that throngs with life late into the evening thanks to far-sighted city planners. But outside of Portland, Oregon is blessed with extraordinary natural beauty. The unspoiled coastline is peppered with lighthouses, sandy coves and sweeping roads that hug the water's edge. Inland, the spirit of the pioneers who opened up the west is evoked by the charming covered bridges and swaying fields of wheat.

Oregon cuisine is influenced by its Pacific coast and the vast Columbia river. Fresh salmon, sturgeon and halibut, Dungeness crab, clams and oysters are found in abundance. The fertile inland valleys are a patchwork of orchards and vegetable farms, and if you travel there in late summer every hedgerow groans under the weight of blueberries, boysenberries and Marion berries - a local speciality akin to a particularly juicy blackberry.

### Geology

Whilst there is precious little limestone in Oregon - 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

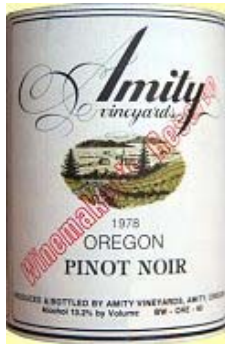


# FEATURES

production is the Willamette Valley, where over 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 occurred around 15,000 years ago that helped shaped today's wine industry. Alex Sokol Blosser explained more of that to me, as you will read in my profile of the Sokol Blosser winery below.

## The second coming of the vine

Oregon is a the third-biggest wine producing state in the USA after neighbouring California and Washington. Settlers planted vines in the 1840s, but the modern industry dates from the hippy 1960s and seems to personify Oregon's open-minded attitude. Sixty percent of the region's vineyards are farmed organically, and many have adopted biodynamic methods.



I had dinner one night with the 'founders', a group of the original pioneers of the 1960's and 1970s, where we drank some fantastic older wines including the sumptuous winemaker's reserve 1978 Pinot Noir from Amity Vineyards shown left. The group reminisced about the early days: "remember this was the 1960s," said Susan Sokol Blosser of the Sokol Blosser winery, "we just had a 'try anything' attitude. Many of us wanted the back to the land lifestyle." A smile crossed her face as she recalled the wine industry's hippy origins: "Vines weren't the only crop being planted out in the farms," she added with a wink.

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

That educated, inquisitive generation recognised that Pinot Noir was both suited to the region and to their sophisticated, worldly palates. 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 wine roads of the Willamette

Spending a few days driving around the Willamette is a wonderful adjunct to a visit to Portland or Oregon's coast. To pronounce it properly, remember the tongue-in-cheek rhyme locals will use to reinforce the message: "It's Willamette Damn-it." Lush, fertile valleys are crammed with hazelnut groves, cherry orchards, hop farms and golden fields of barely and corn. Wildlife is everywhere: bluejays flash like brilliant jewels amongst the trees, turkey vultures soar on thermal currents and sitting on the deck of a winery one day, a tiny hummingbird flitted across my tasting table, back and forth for several minutes. The Willamette is a relatively compact area, and though wine tourism is in its infancy, there are fine dining restaurants and chic accommodations.

Large or small, there is one big wine story for everyone who makes wine in the Willamette, and that story is Pinot Noir. The famously fickle Pinot has an almost mystical fascination for both winemakers and wine lovers, and Oregon is one of very few places outside of its Burgundy homeland that have earned a global reputation for Pinot excellence.



## the wine producers

### Chehalem

My first stop was the Chehalem winery in the Newberg district, just off of Highway 99 from

Portland. Chehalem was founded in 1990 by Harry Peterson-Nedry. Today he is partnered by Bill and Cathy Stoller who own the 360-acre vineyard responsible for much of Chehalem's best fruit, a little of which they bottle under their own Stoller brand. Mike Eyres is winemaker, an affable Kiwi who joined the operation in 2002 after working a stint there as an intern (shown on right, with Sales manager John House). Chehalem (pronounced She-hail-am, and named after the hills on which its vineyards sit) have been dramatically increasing production of their unwooded 'Inox' Chardonnay, after winning Food and Wine magazine's Best Chardonnay under \$20 award in 2007.



To do this they have bought in some fruit, but Mike says "It's of very high quality - it costs more to make than with own fruit." Their most recently planted vineyards are planted and managed quite differently from those first 1989-90 plantings. There's triple the density of vines per acre, and they use mechanical and mulch weed suppression rather than herbicides. Composts have replaced chemical fertilisers and their Ridgecrest vineyard is farmed organically whilst others are being moved in that direction. Mike also tells me that 2006 followed 2003 as the two hottest vintages of the past decade, and average temperature over the last 10 years is significantly warmer than the 30-year average.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 17 wines from Chehalem

Chehalem's tasting room in the town of Newberg is open Thursday through Monday. Winery tastings by appointment. Tel: 503 538-9396.

## Rex Hill and A - Z

Two for the price of one at Rex Hill, sited right across the highway from Chehalem. Established in 1983, Rex Hill is one of Oregon's best-known wine names. When founders Paul Hart and Jan Jacobsen decided to retire in 2007, in stepped Bill and Deb Hatcher (right) of A to Z wines to take the company over. The move made the group one of Oregon's largest producers with 100,000 cases annually - huge by Oregon standards, where 5,000 or 10,000 cases is closer to the average. A to Z is a negociant operation: a brand that existed without owning its own vineyards or winery. The acquisition of Rex Hill brought with it a winery, excellent tasting and visitor facilities and over 30 acres of land, 17 of which are currently planted to Pinot Noir.



There is also one small block of Muscat, and all of the winery staff, from visitor centre staff to office workers, take a couple of vines each which they tend as their own as part of the Hatcher's plan to make sure everyone at Rex Hill is connected with the land. Bill Hatcher brings a wealth of experience to the operation, having helped set up and develop Domaine Drouhin where he worked from 1987 until 2001. Deb Hatcher is in charge of sales and marketing, whilst Sam Tannahill and his wife Cheryl Francis are in charge of winemaking. Sam graduated from Dijon University with a degree in oenology, whilst Cheryl also studied in France before making wine in New Zealand. The couple also own a small operation called Francis Tannahill Winery, with fruit coming from their own biodynamic vineyard.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 17 wines from Rex Hill and A - Z

Rex Hill is open daily, 11:00am - 5:00pm. Tel: 0800 739 4455

## Domaine Drouhin

The beautiful estate of Domaine Drouhin is an outpost of Burgundy's Joseph Drouhin. Sitting high on one of Willamette's prime terroirs, the Dundee Hills, the winery is in a low-set building surrounded by flower-filled gardens and a broad terrace that sits quietly in the landscape. Fourth generation family winemaker Véronique Drouhin makes silky, seductive and Burgundian Pinot Noir and classy Chardonnay.

In fact, Robert Drouhin was a pioneer here, arriving in 1987 and making his first few vintages at what is now Chehelam cellars, until he was totally confident that Oregon was going to work for him. Their current facility on the Dundee Hills dates from 1989.



Today, Veronique and Robert Drouhin come to Oregon from Burgundy regularly for blending and key decision making, spending days tasting from barrel. Their extensive vineyards are tightly planted with Dijon and Pommard clones of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The all-gravity flow winery appears to be a modest building from the outside, but inside is nine stories deep. Unusual horizontal tanks are fitted with a revolving paddle to break the cap, and the free-run juice falls straight to barrels on the floor below. The Drouhin's say they want to be "good neighbours," so their ethos is not to 'teach' Oregon about Pinot and Chardonnay, and they say that just as many ideas filter back to Burgundy in a two-way exchange.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on six wines from Domaine Drouhin

Domaine Drouhin is open for tasting Wednesday to Sunday, appointments are only necessary for the 90-minute tour, which costs \$20. Tel: 503 864 2700.

## Sokol Blosser

Next stop is Sokol Blosser, where second generation Alex Sokol Blosser (right) walked me through the vineyards, speaking eloquently about their iron-rich, red soils. Sokol Blosser is one of the Willamette's originals, being founded by Alex's parents Bill and Susan in 1971. Alex describes his land with real enthusiasm, and explains how the character of the Dundee Hills was formed 15,000 years ago. A giant ice wall that dammed Lake Missoula, an enormous body of water in Idaho, gave way. A flood swept across Washington and down the Columbia River, filling the Willamette Valley to a depth of 100 metres. The Missoula floods eventually subsided, leaving a 10-metre thickness of sediment below the flood-line, and lean, basalt-based soils above.



These high-ground soils above 100 metres are particularly prized by Pinot makers. The reddish 'Jory' soil is the object of desire of Pinot growers high on the Dundee Hills, whilst the free-draining 'Willakenzie' soil is found in many other top vineyards. Sokol Blosser's Pinot is excellent, but don't miss their two unusual non-vintage blends; Evolution, an aromatic white from nine varieties including Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris and a Meditrina, a blend of Pinot, Syrah and Zinfandel sourced from three different states.

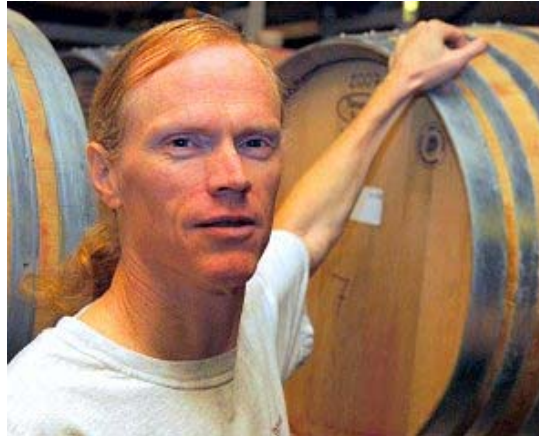
[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on five wines from Sokol Blosser

Visitor facilities are open daily. Tel: 503 864 2282.

## Sineann

"Hold on a minute" shouts Peter Rosback, as he hurtles past me in reverse on his fork-lift, retrieving pallets of new wine bottles from the back of a delivery lorry. He extracts another pallet, and I leap for my life as he tears back towards his tiny winery: "this guy has turned up early, and there's only me to do everything here."

Sineann is one of the most intriguing estates I visited in Oregon. Winemaker and owner, Peter runs a super-négociant operation, making wines not only from Oregon fruit, but from grapes grown in New Zealand, Washington State and the Napa Valley. He must clock-up a shed-load of air miles as he circumnavigates the globe.



All of Peter's wines are bottled under the glass Vinolock system, and the winemaking is meticulous, whether a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, Washington Gewürztraminer or Oregon Pinot Noir. His little winery is a hodge-podge of invention, with some old steel Coco-Cola barrels used for fermenting Pinot Gris as well as French oak. There's a bewildering inventory of small lots to be controlled, and Peter spends several weeks of each year in Marlborough as well as commuting from Oregon to Washington and California regularly. Tasting notes on a dozen Sineann wines are brief as our tasting session was conducted at break-neck speed. But I guess that's life in this truly a hand-on operation.

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 12 wines from Sineann

Visitor by appointment only. Tel: 503 341 2698.

## Atticus

If Sineann is a boutique operation, then Atticus with its 500-case production is positively bijou. 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 to live their dream, largely because of their love for Pinot Noir. Whilst Guy continues to pay the bills through his day job, Peruvian-born Ximena has been studying winemaking and working as a 'cellar rat' (pictured right, Ximena with mentor winemaker Scott Schull of Raptor Ridge). For now they make their wines at Carlton Cellars, a custom winemaking facility. They say their aim is to one day have their own small winery producing 5,000 cases.



Guy and Ximena purchased a vineyard property in the Yamhill district in 2004, and say it has been "a huge rollercoaster ride," moving their young family from Florida and building a house on the property. They also source fruit from the two vineyards they have used since setting up in 2005, and most of their production is sold to local restaurants and wine stores.

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

Visits by appointment. Tel: 503 662 3485.

part II featuring profiles of 10 more wineries plus some restaurant, hotel and visitor ideas for Oregon will be published on Tuesday January 20th.

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