

Can Oregon wines last?

4 Aug 2009 by Jancis Robinson

At the end of this year's [International Pinot Noir Celebration](#) in Oregon, on which I'll be publishing detailed tasting notes separately, a few of us out-of-town wine writers were shown the following selection of Oregon wines chosen to demonstrate the ageing potential of wines from the state. Apparently the wines had been submitted by an array of producers and then the final few dozen were selected on the basis of tasting by a panel of 11 Oregon winemakers. Harry Peterson Nedry of Chehalem and Ted Casteel of Bethel Heights led us through this range, which did indeed demonstrate that Oregon wines can last just as long as, and sometimes longer than, equivalent wines from classic regions of Europe. It also showed that wines made in rainy years such as 1996 and 1997 can last well.

PINOT NOIR

Pinot styles seem to have got sweeter and in general less appetising this millennium - although the 2007s are looking lovely and fresh, much more so than the very ripe 2006s. We were told that in the other very hot year, 2003, raising was a much bigger problem than in 2006. The 2003s sold well but few winemakers wanted to submit them for this tasting. Our hosts admitted that the climate was definitely warming, with cool years 2007 and 2008 still warmer than summers used to be.

Ponzi Pinot Noir 1979 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 1985-98

Mid rust with pale brick rim. Very delicate nose but attractive. Round and soft and fully evolved. Rose petal. Not like mature burgundy - softer and sweeter - but very attractive rosejelly. One of very few wines in this selection that was actually past it - which at 30 years old it is certainly allowed to be. 12%

Amity, Winemaker's Reserve Pinot Noir 1985 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 1995-2010

Firm, heady nose with real spine of ripe fruit and good acidity. There's even still a little bit of tannin. Vigorous and not dead, even if the tannins are still slightly rustic. 13.1%

Ponzi, Reserve Pinot Noir 1991 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 1999-2013

Dark ruby. Pale rim. Rose petals again - as on the 1979 - but richer and more concentrated. Hint of treacle toffee. Very together and still vigorous and hugely impressive. At about the same stage of evolution as a good 1991 Côte de Nuits. Just perhaps very slightly sickly and hot on the finish, but that is picking holes. Very big crop apparently. 12.5%

Domaine Serene, Evenstad Reserve Pinot Noir 1993 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 1999-2013

Mid ruby. Very light nose. Delicate, nicely balanced, Côte de Beaune style. Very polished and sweet. Though there is good acidity and the tannins are all melded. Not quite the character of the Ponzi 1991 but very well made. 12.0%

Chehalem, Reserve Pinot Noir 1994 Willamette Valley 16 Drink 2000-10

Notably dark ruby with the colour pretty much out to the rim. A bit of char and tobacco on the nose. Very concentrated, tastes as though this was a particularly dry year. Thick skins and dominant tannins. Lots of alcohol. Like a 2003? Not the most subtle or delicate but it certainly isn't dead! Can't quite see it acquiring nuance though. 13.9%

Archery Summit Pinot Noir 1995 Oregon 15.5 Drink 2000-10

Deep, healthy ruby with a pale rim. Something smells a little confectioned here - some strange oak? Very sweet. Not very appetising. Full on but not very Pinot. A bit harsh and brash. 13.5%

Chehalem, Reserve Pinot Noir 1996 Oregon 17.5 Drink 2000-2014

Light ruby - transparent and appealing. Very muted but rather intriguing and pure nose. There's a real Pinot delicacy here and great balance. Seriously appetising and much more attractive (and less tart) than most 1996 red burgundies are now. Some juicy fruit. Fine. Polished tannins. Bravo! 13.2%

Domaine Serene, Evenstad Reserve Pinot Noir 1997 Willamette Valley 18 Drink 2005-16

First bottle: Slight mushroom note on the nose. Delicate, lively, racy. Pretty Côte de Beaune. Rather nice muscularity. Good balance. This wine still has somewhere to go. Second bottle: Much fresher nose - even more impressive. 13%

Bethel Heights, Southeast Block Pinot Noir 1998 Willamette Valley 16 Drink 2005-12

Dark crimson. Sweet and in-your-face, very direct old-style. This vineyard is still on its own roots. Rather rustic tannins. Solid, yeoman stuff. 13%

Hamacher Pinot Noir 1998 Oregon 16.5 Drink 2008-14

Dark ruby. Very solid and dense - not very aromatic. Thick and sweet and a bit dusty. Not the purity evident in his later wines. Trying a bit too hard. No delicacy. Will the tannins ever be tamed? Dry tannins on the finish. This doesn't seem to have the light touch of more recent wines from Eric Hamacher. 13%

Argyle, Spirithouse Pinot Noir 1999 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2004-13

Firm ruby. Rich, sturdy nose. Well balanced - very smooth. Absolutely at its peak now. Perhaps slightly sweeter than perfection but a very nice wine. 13.5%

Brooks, Janus Pinot Noir 2002 Oregon 18 Drink 2007-13

Notably pale. Bright red. Very individualistic and distinctive. More freshness than most. Transparent and so casual and confident! Bravo! Lovely expressive, lucid Pinot. 13.9%

Penner- Ash Pinot Noir 2002 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2006-12

Quite dark crimson. Heady black fruit aromas. Black cherry? Super sweet start but nice juiciness and freshness on the finish. Velvety texture. Probably a very true expression of where it comes from though a little sweet for my personal taste. Still some fine tannins there. 13.9%

Bethel Heights, Casteel Reserve Pinot Noir 2004 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2008-15

Dark ruby. That gamey note I have seen on other Bethel Heights wines. More sophisticated than the Southeast Block 1998 but quite dry tannins. Vigorous. 13.8%

Erath, Prince Hill Pinot Noir 2004 Dundee Hills 16.5 Drink 2008-15

Transparent ruby. Juicy jujube notes on the nose. Then real freshness and juicy fruit. A very exuberant wine. Not long on subtlety but confident enough for the future. 13.2%

Rex Hill, Reserve Pinot Noir 2004 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2007-13

Dark ruby. Appetising, quite subtle and nicely silky texture on the nose. Very sweet start. Black cherry compote. Big and in your face. The balance is OK but this is not subtle! Hint of liquorice. 13.8%

Adelsheim, Bryan Creek Vineyard Pinot Noir 2006 Chehalem Mountains 16.5 Drink 2010-17

Mid crimson. Gamey nose. Juicy and jewel-like. Fresh fruit, crackling in the mouth. This tastes purple! Sufficient acidity but definitely too young to savour. Second bottle a little more refined but definitely still has the odd party note. 14.5%

Amity, Reserve Pinot Noir 2006 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 2009-17

Polished crimson. Sweet and raspberry-like. Some freshness on the palate. Fine tannins. 14.5%

Elk Cove, Reserve Pinot Noir 2006 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2011-18

Dark crimson. Looks pretty youthful! Real poise on this wine. Willamette sweetness plus structure. Pretty snazzy. Complete, even if in full throttle, super-ripe 2006 mode. 14.9%

CHARDONNAY

The big change here was in the amount and sort of wood used, and the introduction of Dijon clones, which allowed a reduction in the proportion of new oak to 30%. It was the previously lacklustre quality of Oregon Chardonnay that encouraged so much planting of Pinot Gris (interesting that this varietal was not included in this tasting). All the wines below were made from Dijon clones, and we had tasted some excellent new wave, young Oregon Chardonnays from the likes of Domaine Drouhin and Hamacher earlier.

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 1997 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2000-08

Magnum. Deep gold. Rich but lively nose. Some toast and peach. Rich and well braced. Very young vines but still lots of life. Hint of cappuccino. Certainly sweet. And perhaps lacks a little vigour. But impressive. 14.6%

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 1998 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2004-12

Magnum. Mid gold. Lift and nerve. Transparency and great satin texture. Race and acidity. So much more alive than most 1998 white burgundies! 13.9%

Argyle, Nuthouse Chardonnay 1999 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2003-08

Gold. Soft, gentle and a bit fragile. The merest hint of decay (on both bottles) on the nose - but interesting! Vegy, leafy, spearmint(?) nose. Very sweet finish. 13.5%

Domaine Serene, Clos du Soleil Chardonnay 2001 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 2006-13

Deep greenish gold. More savoury than most - perhaps the cooper's rather than the winemaker's art? Dry and savoury and grown up. Very ambitious. Just a little alcoholic. 14.0%

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 2002 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2008-15

Crystal clear pale gold. Light and savoury and grown up on the nose though surprisingly sweet on the front palate. Rescued by the structure and acidity on the palate. Real tightrope stuff! Maybe on balance just a little too sweet..? Great winemaking though....The ripeness of California with the delicacy of Burgundy. 13.9%

Adelsheim, Caitlin's Reserve Chardonnay 2003 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2007-11

Pale gold. Appetising even if in minor key. Light and fresh. Not at all like a 2003...! Just a bit heavy and hot on the finish. 14.1%

Ponzi, Reserve Chardonnay 2003 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2010-16

Mid gold. Hint of mint on the nose. Lots of fresh acidity. Pretty burgundian. Maybe not the subtlest but attractively savoury. Transparent. Long and with real potential - more than many 2003 burgundies! 13.5%

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 2005 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2009-15

Deep straw. Very snazzy and bright and almost Riesling like. Tropical and exotically aromatic. Sinewy and well structured. Nice wine! Jewel bright. Very broad and pretty fat. 14.5%

Domaine Serene, Cote Sud Chardonnay 2006 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2010-14

Rich and sweet and soft. Could do with more acidity. Bit heavy. But there are some savoury oak notes. Plus whisky lactones! 14.5%

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 2007 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 2012-18

Racy, lively very youthful and tight. 13.5%

Rex Hill Chardonnay 2007 Willamette Valley 17.5 Drink 2012-17

Heady and floral and sumptuous. Rich aromatically but lively on the palate. What's not to like? 13.5%

ADDITIONAL CHARDONNAYS

The following wines were tasted at a small presentation by the seven members of ORCA, the Oregon Chardonnay Alliance, which promotes 'the rebirth of Oregon Chardonnay; thanks to the substitution of Dijon clones and more burgundian winemaking techniques'.

Adelsheim, Caitlin's Reserve Chardonnay 2007 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2010-12

Some of these grapes were grown by the respected Bill Stoller, who turned over his family's turkey farm to the vine. Very fresh, vibrant nose. White peach and nectarine flavours in abundance. Still a little tight on the finish but it promises very well and may even develop more subtlety.

\$40

Argyle, Nuthouse Chardonnay 2007 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2010-13

From Lone Star with Stoller vineyards. Lightly reductive nose. Notably tight and taut. Savoury with a bone dry finish – a bit of a Chablis really. Pretty sophisticated. \$35

Chehalem, Ian's Reserve Chardonnay 2006 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2009-15

Also from Stoller Vineyards. Much more developed than the 2007 noted above, with the oak a little obvious. Very nice bright fruit character and a zingy hint of orange peel. Long and serious but arguably just a bit too open at this stage.

\$36

Domaine Drouhin, Arthur Chardonnay 2007 Dundee Hills 17 Drink 2010-14

From estate vineyards, a blend of old- barrel- fermented and stainless- steel- fermented fruit. Very pale gold. Definitely more burgundian and crisper than most of these Chardonnays. Some mealiness on the nose then very poised, polished texture. Distinctive dry fruit and excellent persistence. Almost gets better on the finish – very burgundian.

\$30

Domaine Serene, Côte Sud Vineyard Chardonnay 2006 Willamette Valley 16 Drink 2008-10

Estate vineyard up to 680 feet elevation. Peaches and cream on the nose – relatively rich. Reminds me quite strongly of a California Chardonnay with its full- on ripeness. Lacks the precision of some of the finer Oregon Chardonnays.

\$45

Hamacher, Cuvée Forêts Diverses Chardonnay 2007 Dundee Hills 17 Drink 2009-13

From the Durant Vineyard. Name ominously salutes the oaks used but in fact there is no excess oaky note. Instead this is lightly but attractively funky with admirable balance. Stone fruit flavours. Subtle. Extremely lively. Only medium weight but impressive layers of interest.

\$30

Ponzi Chardonnay Reserve 2006 Willamette Valley 15.5 Drink 2008-10

Fully evolved on the nose already. In the notes, along with white nectarine, toasted meringue, marzipan, golden raspberry, spice and a touch of orange peel, we are promised 'quince blossom', which, alas, I have never encountered. The oldest- tasting wine of this range. A bit rich at first and then finishes dry. Less lively fruit than most – a bit disjointed.

RIESLING

The Rieslings of the late [Jimi Brooks](#) were the clear standouts here. Riesling is regarded as a late ripener in the Willamette Valley.

Amity, Dry Riesling 1988 Oregon 15 Drink 1991-99

Dark gold. Fat and heavy and a bit decayed. Reminds me of an old, rather brutal, Australian Riesling. Austere and chewy. One of the few wines in this line- up to be too old. 10.5%

Argyle Reserve Dry Riesling 1991 Oregon 16.5 Drink 1997-2011

Not too dark. A bit chewy but lively. Still very savoury and alive. Presumably all that experience at sister company Petaluma in South Australia helped. 12.0%

Amity, Dry Riesling 1995 Oregon 15.5 Drink 1999-2006

Sweet, lively, a bit simple. 11.4%

Chehalem Reserve, Corral Creek Vineyard Riesling 1998 Willamette Valley 15 Drink 2001-06

Rather old and brutal. Burnished. Emblazoned. Battle weary. Lost its freshness. 12.2%

Anam Cara Riesling 2005 Willamette Valley 16 Drink 2008-12

Pale. Herbal and fine on the nose. Dense - maybe not that fine but very true and honest aromas. Off dry. I'd love to see future vintages of this wine because the fruit is great. Just a bit heavy handed in the winemaking perhaps? 12.1%

Brooks Riesling 2005 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 2008-13

Pale straw. Very clean and Germanic though light on the nose. Very fine and focused and great balance. Off dry, pzazz!!!! Just what I want to drink now as my aperitif. 13.3%

A to Z Riesling 2007 Oregon 16.5 Drink 2008-10

Screwcap. Pale. Tropical and please- all. Floral and easy. Fresh and bright. Lily headiness. A tad astringent but probably a great value at £6-10 a bottle. Lightly toasty. 12.5%

Chehalem Reserve Riesling 2007 Willamette Valley 16.5 Drink 2010-13

Screwcap. Not much nose but bone dry and very racy. The most uncompromising wine of the lot. Should be a good food partner. Maybe just slightly too austere. 12.7%

Brooks, Ara Riesling 2008 Willamette Valley 17 Drink 2011-17

Chris Williams makes the wine. He was Jimmy Brooks's assistant. Ex WillaKenzie. Quite big and opulent then tart and floral. 12.7%

BIGGER REDS

There was remarkably little change in colour between the 1998 and 2005. These wines demonstrated just how much of the Walla Walla AVA is in Oregon. The Seven Hills vineyard predominates.

Seven Hills Winery, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 1998 Walla Walla Valley 16 Drink 2004-12

Walla Walla. Sweet and a bit fragile and fine. Just a bit brutal. 13.0%

L'Ecole 41 Merlot 1999 Walla Walla Valley 16.5 Drink 2005-12

Walla Walla. Sweet very rich and malty. Flattering though not necessarily very pure. Cocoa malty finish. 13.2%

Sinnean Merlot 2000 Columbia Valley 16 Drink 2008-13

Hillside Vineyard in Columbia Valley. S of WA. Some green herby notes. Then tough and inky. Not very balanced or mellifluous. 13.8%

Griffin Creek, Vineyard Blend Merlot 2001 Rogue Valley 15.5 Drink 2006-10

Minty and rather tough and austere. Fruit is fading a bit. 14.5%

Griffin Creek Syrah 1998 Rogue Valley 15.5 Drink 2008-12

Lifted but a bit confectioned. Sinewy. OK as an early example of this variety but the wine has no great sense of place. 12.5%

Rockblock, Seven Hills Vineyard Syrah 2002 Walla Walla Valley 17 Drink 2008-13

From Domaine Serene. Rich and dense. Polished and treacly and liquorice. Polished. Flattering. A bit hot on the finish but easy to like. 14.5%

Rockblock, Seven Hills Vineyard Syrah 2005 Walla Walla Valley 17.5 Drink 2009-17

Much more integrity than the 2002. Rich and yet lively and powerful. Great, flattering balance. Dry and spicy. Maybe slightly too alcoholic but a great drink! 15.5%