

Oregon vineyards with
Mount Hood in the distance

The peak of perfection

USA For wine of outstanding quality, with locally produced food to match, all served in an atmosphere of warm celebration, it is hard to beat Oregon's Willamette Valley, says **Nicholas Lander**

IN THE LONG-ESTABLISHED wine regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and Tuscany, where labels bear the outlines of centuries-old chateaux or *castelli*, there is a definite division between what a visitor can see and enjoy and what is kept private. Any hospitality tends to be formal and takes place behind closed doors.

Few non-Europeans planning to build a winery today would follow the same

pattern. The wineries of South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile and California, where hospitality is much more open and far less structured, usually have a casual restaurant next to the tasting room so that the wines can be enjoyed as they are intended to be, alongside good food.

Anyone who is keen on eating while discovering great wine in the most relaxed

circumstances should head to the vineyards of Oregon, in the Willamette Valley, an hour's drive south of Portland. This region is now acknowledged for its excellent wines, particularly Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris, but it will also appeal to anyone who loves nature.

Oregon is famed for its natural beauty. The countryside is verdant, thanks to the wet winters, but summers are warm. This ►



Clockwise from left: an open-air Grand Dinner at the International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC); the Ponzi wine bar and restaurant in Dundee; carving a joint at an IPNC lunch



(it will never exceed 5,000 cases), the impact of this trail-blazing winery was enormous. Today there are about 420 wineries in the region, and this is due in large part to the strength of David Lett's personality, the support of his wife Diana and the vision he had for the region in which he chose to live. As well as making the most expressive wine he could to convert lovers of red Burgundy around the world to the charms of Oregon-grown Pinot Noir, Lett was also determined to safeguard the countryside.

In addition to the wine-making tradition he established, Lett left two other legacies. The first was the foundation of the 1,000 Friends of Oregon non-profit organisation, concerned with the issues of land use and planning. Its aim is to ensure that as much of the countryside as possible remains available for farming and vineyards rather than being turned over to hotels and golf courses. On my most recent visit to Oregon, 21 years after I had first been there, I was struck by how unspoilt its countryside still is.

Lett's second legacy is the International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC), which he created in 1987. This annual event takes place in the grounds of Linfield College in McMinnville every July and attracts about 700 winemakers and enthusiasts who come from around the world to celebrate Pinot Noir over a long weekend.

There is nothing quite like the IPNC anywhere else in the world (although ➤

➤ is an ideal combination for farming, which has been the state's principal activity, along with logging, for 150 years. Oregon also has a long coastline with sandy beaches that are ideal for walking and sports, though its rarely hot enough for sunbathing. The winds ensure that temperatures here rarely go above 25°C.

This stunning environment has made Oregon a magnet for anyone wanting to escape the heat of California; and in the days when land here was inexpensive it was an obvious destination for those who had a dream but little capital.

This was what brought the late David Lett here to plant the first vineyards, 40 years ago. It is possible to see Lett, who died in 2008, in the tradition of those who tamed the Wild West; except that instead of a gun or a railway map, he carried with

him some Pinot Noir and Chardonnay cuttings. He had headed north from California convinced that Oregon's cooler climate could produce red wines to rival those of his beloved Burgundy; and after taking over a former poultry-processing plant, he produced his first vintage of Eyrie Vineyards Pinot Noir in 1970.

Although production at Eyrie, now in the hands of Lett's son, is limited

‘At the International Pinot Noir Celebration, an open-air Grand Dinner is prepared by a vast team of chefs’



► conferences devoted to Pinot Noir are now held in Australia and New Zealand). And a great deal of its success has to do with the distinctive manner in which the food is prepared and served.

There are two outdoor meals for all the attendees on successive nights. The first, known as the Grand Dinner, takes place on the Friday. As I watched the vast team of chefs at work, Anne Nisbet, IPNC's culinary director, turned to me and said, 'What makes this possible, and my job relatively easy, is that all these chefs volunteer their services. They want to be part of the fun.'

The Grand Dinner is indeed fun (though definitely not grand), and involves chefs from top restaurants in Eugene, Portland and Seattle. But it is the traditional Northwest Salmon Bake, held in an ancient oak grove on

'Nick's Italian Café opened in 1977 and soon became a favourite place for Willamette Valley winemakers to hang out'

the Saturday night, that is the weekend's most popular and memorable event.

In a large, round garden sheltered by tall trees, shallow pits are dug, into which small logs of three different woods are laid. Sides of salmon are then laced through long pieces of alder wood (which imparts its distinctive flavour to the fish), and the pieces of wood are arranged over the pits, neatly interlocked at the top. The fire is lit; the salmon is carefully tended to so that it does not burn; and

Clockwise from far left: Véronique Drouhin at her family's winery; a table at Nick's Italian Café; a pumpkin sformato (savory custard) served there; owner Carmen Peirano in the kitchen

by the time the diners have polished off their first course of half a dozen different salads, they are queuing up again for the delicious salmon. (This being the USA, the display of desserts is vast, too.)

But the biggest fish the IPNC ever caught was Robert Drouhin, the renowned Burgundian winemaker. He first visited Oregon in the 1960s, fell in love with what he saw, and later decided to make wine here, producing his first vintage of Domaine Drouhin Oregon in 1988.

Today, DDO (as it is referred to locally) has its own winery in the hills, with 100 acres of vines under the supervision of Véronique Drouhin. Visiting here, it is very easy to see what inspired the Drouhin family to make the move to Oregon. The countryside rolls away in all directions in various shades of green, and to the east stands the imposing Mount Hood, its top covered in snow all year round.

Robert Drouhin was joined in the region by Brian Croser, the renowned Australian winemaker of Petaluma, who started the Argyle Winery, best known for its top-quality fizz, in the town of Dundee. Together with a growing number of local producers such as David Adelsheim, now one of the region's most respected winemakers, they started meeting and eating in a good, local restaurant thanks to Nick Peirano, who opened Nick's Italian Café in 1977.

NICK'S ITALIAN CAFÉ came about because, despite a college degree and several years in the army, Peirano had very little money. All he could afford was a site on Third Street in downtown McMinnville that had once been a diner. He also had very few recipes. But he came from good Italian stock, so he could count on his mother's recipes for soups and pasta; and Ray, his grandfather, was obviously a dab hand at pizzas because Ray's Pizza is still a very popular item on the menu.

Nick's has stood the test of time for several reasons. Peirano, in his trademark braces, is a strong character with a strong face that could have landed him a role in *The Sopranos*. With limited funds, he refurbished the diner simply but comfortably enough to make his customers happy. And he got the pricing right, by offering a straightforward, ►



➤ reasonable à la carte menu during the day and a five-course dinner menu in the evening (currently priced at \$65). As a result, Nick's became the place for winemakers to hang out. 'The wineries would have succeeded without Nick's, but I'm not sure I would have survived without them,' Peirano told me.

He has secured the restaurant's future by selling it to his daughter Carmen and her husband, both of whom have more of a professional culinary background. However, they have cleverly ensured Peirano's continued presence by converting the storeroom at the back into a bar (complete with a 1913 Brunswick pool table) that is obviously his pride and joy.

The cafés, wine bars and restaurants of McMinnville and the surrounding towns have grown through the efforts of these and numerous other adventurous characters. But the region's emergence as a great food-and-wine destination has also been enhanced by two other factors: the bountiful surrounding countryside and the presence of Portland nearby. The former yields not just grapes but also extraordinary fruit and vegetables, which are available at roadside stalls, small markets here and there and, most impressively, in the farmers' market in downtown Portland every Saturday morning, now considered one of the best in the USA.

Portland has attracted a large number of chefs, sommeliers, bartenders and coffee enthusiasts over the years, so it has plenty of interesting places to eat and drink. The city's many 'food carts' – including Huang's for Vietnamese,

Above, from left: dinner at Nick's Italian Café; wines in the restaurant's well-stocked cellar; a barbecue food cart on a street in Portland

authentic Japanese dishes at Samurai, traditional Polish fare at Taste of Poland, excellent coffee at Spella, and many more – are not to be missed. The presence of a vibrant food culture so close to the vineyards has created a symbiosis that can now be compared to the one that exists 10 hours' drive further south, between Napa Valley and San Francisco.

And for travellers who welcome comfort alongside their forays into the vineyards, the hospitable B&Bs

that until recently have looked after most visitors to McMinnville have been joined by the 85-room Allison Inn & Spa, which opened last September in Newberg, 15 miles away.

Owned by local businesswoman Joan Austin, the Allison offers every modern pleasure: a large swimming pool; spa and therapy rooms; and an impressive restaurant with an open kitchen under chef Stephen Marshall. And in keeping with what makes this part of Oregon special, Austin has planted the surrounding hillside with Pinot Noir grapes which David Adelsheim will make into undoubtedly distinctive wine. **T**

A TASTE OF OREGON'S WINE COUNTRY

GETTING THERE

The Willamette Valley is an hour's drive south of Portland.

United Airlines (0845 844 4777; www.unitedairlines.co.uk) has direct flights from Heathrow to Portland.

THE WINERIES

The Eyrie Vineyards. 935 NE 10th Avenue at Alpine, McMinnville (00 1 503 472 6315; www.eyrievineyards.com). Open 12pm-5pm. Closed Mon and Tues. Admission \$5

Domaine Drouhin Oregon. 6750 Breyman Orchards Road, Dayton (00 1 503 864 2700; www.domainedrouhin.com).

Open 11am-4pm. Closed Mon and Tues. Admission \$10

WINE EVENT
International Pinot Noir Celebration (00 1 503 472 8964; www.ipnc.org). 23-25 July 2010

WHERE TO EAT
Nick's Italian Café. 521 NE Third Street, McMinnville (00 1 503 434 4471; www.nicksitaliancafe.com). Five-course tasting menu from \$65
Portland's food carts (www.foodcartsportland.com) are recommended for a vast range of food on the run.

WHERE TO STAY

The Allison Inn & Spa. 2525 Allison Land, Newberg (00 1 503 554 2525; www.theallison.com). Doubles from \$348

Youngberg Hill Vineyards & Inn. 10660 Youngberg Hill Road, McMinnville (00 1 503 472 2727; www.youngberghill.com). Doubles from \$212

