



The *Decanter* travel guide to

# Oregon, US

Gourmet food, sensational wines and the chance to mingle with winemakers – Fiona Beckett is in heaven at Oregon’s International Pinot Noir Celebration

I’M SITTING IN the middle of a huge grassy lawn drinking Pinot Noir – with 600 people around me. It’s like the ultimate alfresco dinner party with a phalanx of glasses on every table. Our sommelier Mary, who hails from Los Angeles, brings a bottle, then another, and another. Winemakers wander past to pour a treasured vintage. You carelessly dump what’s in your glass to try the next – a wanton waste, but how can you miss out?

Welcome to the mad, hedonistic world of the International Pinot Noir Celebration, or IPNC as it’s called for short. I’d been meaning to go for years, and I wasn’t disappointed. It was more spectacular than I could have imagined – and quite bizarre to see people who had splashed out \$1,000 (£630) for a weekend patiently queuing up for the chance to be doled out a mere sip of some treasured bottle.

## Getting to grips with the grape

The organisation is formidable. To make things manageable, the attendees are divided into two groups. One group is further split up and sent on ‘mystery tours’ to various local winemakers, while the other group attends a seminar. Our group was dispatched to Belle Pente, founded by former home brewers Jill and Brian O’Donnell in 1994 and

Photographs: Andrea Johnson/IPNC(Z). Maps: Maggie Nelson

### FACT FILE

**Number of wineries**

387

**Number of vineyards**

835 (Vitis vinifera)

**Main grape**

Pinot Noir, at 60% of total plantings (11,523 hectares)

**Pinot Noir production**

21,700kg (2009)

**Pinot Noir average yield**

31.86 hectolitres/hectare

**Pinot Noir annual sales**

842,721 cases (2009)



**Above: the culmination of Oregon's International Pinot Noir Celebration is a salmon bake, where winemakers share their treasured vintages (top)**

**Left: the hedonistic weekend gives wine lovers the chance to mingle with professionals and enjoy superb wine and food**

*'It's like the ultimate alfresco dinner party, with a phalanx of glasses on every table'*

farmed organically and biodynamically. As Brian took us on a tour through the vineyards, with their stunning views over the Willamette Valley, I wondered what amateur enthusiasts were making of their discussions about rootstock and clones. But one of the great draws of this unique event is the chance for wine lovers to mingle with professionals.

Back at the winery we had a go at creating our own blend from three different barrels – a far more difficult task than it sounds. I craftily managed to place myself next to Russ Rosner, the winemaker from Sokol Blosser (see box, right) but even with his advice, struggled to create a balanced wine. Each table then pooled its findings to come up with the perfect blend. Fascinatingly, we all came up with very different wines. I found ours voluptuous and rich in the glass but when I came to judge it at the



## Six top vineyards to visit By Paul Gregutt

### 1 Rex Hill/A to Z

Rex Hill, just out of Newberg, pioneered single-vineyard Oregon Pinots, and A to Z (same owners) makes some of Oregon's best-value wines. The tasting room, set amid old vines, includes an 'essence table' of glasses that reflect the aromas of wine. [www.rexhill.com/www.atozwineworks.com](http://www.rexhill.com/www.atozwineworks.com)

### 2 Trisaetum

This newcomer to Yamhill County is notable for superb Rieslings and Pinot Noirs, but also for owner James Frey's photos and paintings. The Fermentation Series uses vineyard soil and the Element series uses vine cuttings. [www.trisaetum.com](http://www.trisaetum.com)

### 3 Carlton Winemakers Studio

This winery incubator, founded by Eric Hamacher and Luisa Ponzi, hosts up to 12 garagistes. In its first decade, the studio launched cult wineries, including Hamacher, Sotor, Scott Paul and Penner Ash. As many as 40 wines are offered by the glass. [www.winemakersstudio.com](http://www.winemakersstudio.com)

### 4 Scott Paul/Kelley Fox

This small tasting room in Carlton holds many delights. Owners Scott and Martha Wright and winemaker Kelley Fox are often on site, pouring Scott Paul Pinots, along with limited-production Kelley Fox wines and a selection of Burgundies. [www.scottpaul.com/www.kelleyfoxwines.com](http://www.scottpaul.com/www.kelleyfoxwines.com)

### 5 Domaine Serene/ Domaine Drouhin Oregon

These Dundee neighbours epitomise the two styles of Oregon Pinot. Serene makes rich, ripe wines with lots of new oak; DDO aims for elegance using the family's Burgundy expertise. [www.domaine-serene.com/www.domainedrouhin.com](http://www.domaine-serene.com/www.domainedrouhin.com)

### 6 Sokol Blosser

South of Dundee, this founding winery of modern Oregon has led the way in sustainable, organic and carbon neutral winemaking. Walking and riding tours are available, along with the tasting room, picnic foods and an outdoor deck for dining. [www.sokolblosser.com](http://www.sokolblosser.com)

end, along with sommelier Cyril Frechier of Seattle's Campagne, it seemed way too oaky. In the end we voted for the blend created by Brian himself – I guess he should know his barrels. It was a humbling experience. I think I'll stick to writing about wine.

Next came probably the best meal of the whole weekend – and that's saying something. It was created by Ben Bettinger, a young chef from Portland restaurant Beaker & Flask. One of the charms of IPNC is that it showcases homegrown chefs and local produce, such as the corn bisque and Oregon shrimp salad that Bettinger served; a perfect match for the 2007 Belle Pente Chardonnay.

## How to get there By plane

There are no non-stop flights to Portland, Oregon from the UK, but you can go via major US hubs like San Francisco, Chicago, New York or Los Angeles. Minimum flight time (including layovers) is about 12 hours, then it's about an hour's drive to the vineyards.



*'The celebration is not just a must for any Pinot lover, but a must for any wine lover'*

### Tasting and feasting

The next day the seminar was on food and wine pairing (it changes every year). Led by irrepressible wine educator Evan Goldstein, it featured four wines: Domaine de l'Arlot, Clos des Fôrets, Nuits-St-Georges 1er Cru 2004 from Burgundy; Pegasus Bay, Prima Donna Pinot Noir 2006 from Waipara in New Zealand; Dutton-Goldfield, Freestone Hill 2007 from Russian River Valley in California; and St Innocent, Momtazi Pinot Noir 2007 from Oregon's Willamette Valley. First the winemakers talked about the wines, then the chefs explained the thinking behind the dishes they'd created to go with them.

As is the way of these experiments, people come to different conclusions but what I found interesting was that the age of the wines influenced the match just as much as their origin. The standout pairing was the vibrant Pegasus Bay with a dish of rare loin of lamb with a plum and preserved lemon relish – a style of cooking that defeated the older, more delicate Burgundy, which went much better with a traditional dish of braised lamb shank and beans.

At the end of each day there were open tastings, where Pinot makers from all over the world – from Patagonia to Burgundy – showed a couple of bottles from their range. Even in that illustrious company the Oregon wines shone. No wonder the French wandered round looking vaguely disconsolate.

And in between? Well, believe it or not, more eating. Amazing breakfasts (Oregon's berries are as luscious as their grapes). A brunch of gargantuan

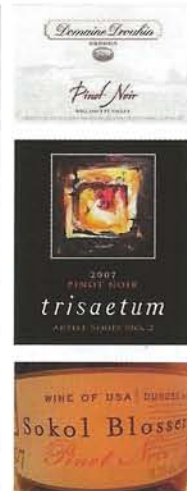


proportions including a sushi table. An alfresco 'Pink Pinot' lunch where the umbrellas had to be moved every quarter of an hour to shield us from the blazing sun. (Anyone who thinks Oregon is cool climate should visit in July.)

The weekend culminates in the famous salmon bake, where whole sides of salmon are strapped to alder wood stakes and grilled over charcoal – another perfect Pinot pairing. Collectors bring their own high-end wines to share, others pile into the 'mosh pit' on the slim chance they can get to try one. By the end of the evening I'm afraid we wimp out, heading gratefully for the beer and cider tent and finishing, like true Brits, with a cup of tea.

Looking back, this exhilarating and heady experience is not just a must for any Pinot lover, but a must for any wine lover. It's also a great excuse (if one were needed) to spend a couple more days in Oregon, which has some of the most appealingly bucolic landscapes of any wine region I've been to. But do it after rather than before the event. Trust me, you'll need the rest. **D**

*Fiona Beckett is the wine columnist for UK newspaper The Guardian and a Decanter contributing editor*



Left: eating and drinking is a major part of Oregon's International Pinot Noir Celebration, while winery seminars (below left) yield an opportunity to meet winemakers and gain insider knowledge

### WIN A TRIP TO OREGON FOR THIS YEAR'S INTERNATIONAL PINOT NOIR CELEBRATION

The prize: flights for two, London to Portland; two tickets to the 25th anniversary IPNC on 29-31 July in McMinnville, with three nights' accommodation at Stoller Vineyards; two nights at The Heathman Hotel in Portland; and two nights on the coast to explore Oregon's fine landscape and gastronomy. To enter, visit [decanter.com/Oregon](http://decanter.com/Oregon). For more about Oregon or the IPNC, visit [www.TravelOregon.com](http://www.TravelOregon.com) and [www.ipnc.org](http://www.ipnc.org)

# Oregon wine country

## WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX

Locally sourced foods, unique accommodation and a new market

The epicentre of Oregon's wine industry is Yamhill County, in the northern Willamette Valley, writes *Paul Gregutt*. The main highway runs through Newberg, McMinnville and Dundee, all with accessible tasting rooms, restaurants and hotels. But the most beautiful countryside is in the hills around Dundee, Carlton and Yamhill.

Yamhill County also boasts seasonal berries, mushrooms, organic meats and dairy, and a wealth of chefs devoted to making the most of local products.

Oregon's summer weather, particularly in July and August, can be very hot (35°C–40°C is not uncommon), and then cool down dramatically in the evenings. Dress like the locals, in casual, layered clothing, and use sun block if you are venturing outdoors. It is easy to get lost on country roads, so get good directions before setting out to explore the back country.

### HOTELS Allison Inn & Spa



This new resort and spa has meeting rooms, a pool and lovely grounds. The prestigious on-site restaurant, Jory, features locally sourced foods

and a fine wine list, including 50 wines by the glass. For a special treat, request a seat at the chef's table. [www.theallison.com](http://www.theallison.com)

### Inn at Red Hills

This cosy Dundee establishment is home to the Farm to Fork restaurant, offering all-day service with locally sourced comfort food. There is also a well-stocked deli, and a wine bar featuring hard-to-find boutique bottles for tasting or take out. [www.innatredhills.com](http://www.innatredhills.com)

### Other accommodation



The Black Walnut Inn (*above*) is surrounded by vineyards and views; Brookside Inn is set on nine hectares in Carlton, with nine suites, gardens, hiking trails, and guest chef wine dinners; Abbey Road Farm is a charming B&B with rooms in renovated grain silos; Red Ridge Farms is a nursery and garden shop with a single guest suite; Youngberg Hill Vineyards & Inn has superb mountaintop views, an organic vineyard, four suites and four guest rooms. [www.blackwalnut-inn.com](http://www.blackwalnut-inn.com); [www.brooksideinn-oregon.com](http://www.brooksideinn-oregon.com); [www.abbeyroadfarm.com](http://www.abbeyroadfarm.com); [www.redridgefarms.com](http://www.redridgefarms.com); [www.youngberghill.com](http://www.youngberghill.com)

### 3rd Street Flats

In the historic centre of McMinnville these European-style, nightly apartment rentals each have a full kitchen with dining area. [www.thirdstreetflats.com](http://www.thirdstreetflats.com)

### RESTAURANTS Nick's Italian Café

Nick Peirano's McMinnville eatery has been a winemaker favourite for almost 35 years. Recently remodelled and expanded, it now

offers a backroom bar with wines by the glass and lighter fare. [www.nicksitaliancafe.com](http://www.nicksitaliancafe.com)

### Thistle

This tiny hideaway in McMinnville serves dinner only; you order from a chalkboard menu, with selections such as black trumpet gnocchi; duck breast with cabbage, bacon and black truffles; and a beetroot, rocket, blood orange and chèvre salad. [www.thistlerestaurant.com](http://www.thistlerestaurant.com)

### Cuvée

French country dining in downtown Carlton. The restaurant's small, well-selected wine list features both Oregon and French bottle choices. [www.cuveedining.com](http://www.cuveedining.com)

### The Painted Lady



Quite a fashionable establishment serving dinner only in a Victorian setting. Reservations are essential. The restaurant has one of the region's finest selections of both Oregon and French wines. [www.thepaintedladyrestaurant.com](http://www.thepaintedladyrestaurant.com)

### SHOPS Red Hills Market

Due to open early in 2011, this market is set right on the highway in Dundee, with high-style takeaway deli and picnic foods, farm-sourced seasonal produce, locally roasted coffee, a pétanque court and picnic area. [www.redhillsmarket.com](http://www.redhillsmarket.com)

For more lodging, dining and wine touring options, visit the Willamette Valley Wineries website at [www.willamettewines.com](http://www.willamettewines.com), or the Oregon Wine Board at [www.oregonwine.org](http://www.oregonwine.org). For tailored Oregon wine trips, [www.americaasyoulikeit.com](http://www.americaasyoulikeit.com) is a useful resource.

Below: Oregon's highest peak, Mount Hood, towers over the region's vineyards

