



# Oregon's Wine Pioneers

► EDWIN SOON VISITS THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY, NORTH AMERICA'S SINGLE LARGEST PINOT NOIR REGION, AND TAKES THREE 'SNAPSHOTS' OF EMINENT WINE PRODUCERS.

They say that when grapevines struggle, they produce the best grapes and ultimately, the most intriguing wines. But little did the pioneers of Oregon know that they, too, had to struggle to produce wine in Oregon's Willamette Valley (WV).

#### ARGYLE WINERY

Meet the Texan, Rollin Soles, complete with hat, handlebar moustache and accent. As the winemaker of Argyle Winery, he's had his fair share of hardship in his early days, and is more than willing to share his stories. Today his wines rank as *Wine Spectator's* top 100 wines of the world — no less than 11 times.

Soles tells of the 1960s, "It was a hit and miss affair then. Only in some years did we get ripe grapes. You would think that if grapes got enough heat, just like in California, they would ripen. Then we realised that WV, situated on the 45th parallel, also has the shortest growing season because of the lack of light. As a result of this light deficiency, grapevines begin shutting down for the winter really early. It took us a while to work out that grapes planted on the south or east facing slopes ripened well. Not only that, we found that grapes also struggled to ripen at elevations above 800ft."

Next came mouldy grapes. "We planted bush vines. In hot climates, un-trellised vines grow like a bush with leaves shielding the vines from the sun. However, in our

region, the bush traps moisture and prevents air circulation. We soon wised up and began trellising our vines so we could 'open' the canopy and expose our grapes to the sun, just like in Europe."

"Our vines were generously spaced out. That is until Domaine Drouhin from Burgundy planted grapes in 1987. We tasted their wines and realised that close spacing of vines matched by lower yields resulted in higher quality grapes and better wine."

Finally I taste a product of his labour of love. Soles pours me an Argyle Nuthouse Pinot Noir 2007, the culmination of many lessons learnt. The wine is an excellent Pinot, with a lingering taste of mocha, blueberry and wild berries. His white wine, a Riesling, is also a delight, with lovely stone-fruit and pear aromas and a silky texture.

Fans of WV wines take note: Whilst the region is already known for its Pinot, it will soon be admired for other cool-climate wines too.

#### KEN WRIGHT CELLARS

In the town of Carlton, I meet another pioneer. Originally from Kentucky, Ken Wright made wine in California before he moved to Oregon in 1986 to start up Panther Creek Cellars. Wright has the distinction of being known as "one of the founding fathers of Oregon winemaking". After all, he was instrumental in organising the six new American Viticultural Areas (AVA) in the Northern Willamette Valley. Each AVA

*If you control your yield, you can hasten ripening by as much as two weeks, and harvest before the rain arrives. - Ken Wright on Willamette Valley wine production*

defines, in detail, a unique growing area. It isn't a surprise that Wright naturally gravitated to the subject of terroir in our conversation. Matching grape varieties to climate and soils was something that he had to deal with, through trial and error in his early days. Patiently, he introduces me to the various soils of the WV: basalt/volcanic soils that originated from lava flow; marine sediment from the way the valley is formed; loess or silt carried up by wind from the valley floor; and deposits of silt and sand.

"Consistency of grapes is now the preoccupation of many producers," says Wright. "We found that if you control your yield, you can hasten ripening by as much as two weeks, and harvest before the rain arrives. Additionally, we want our grapes to experience the long growing season as the WV is an extremely cool area. The extended 'hangtime' lets grapes develop flavour, aroma and texture. If you pick the optimal site, use the right clones and rootstocks and modify your vine spacing and trellis system for each individual vineyard site, you will be able to produce some fine wine."

I taste two pairs of Pinot Noir 2008 from Ken Wright Cellars. From the Eola Hills AVA with volcanic soils: a Canary Hill Pinot, exposed to morning sun, showed soy, earth and mixed red fruits, versus a 'Carter' Pinot, exposed to afternoon sun, which was savoury and firmer, with plenty of dark fruit flavours.

From the Yamhill Carter AVA with sandstone and silt soil, the Abbott Claim Pinot was dark and had aromas of black cherry and plum and was linear and long. The Savoya Pinot (made from Savoya grapes grown at an elevation 50 feet higher than Abbot Claim) was complex with nutmeg, earth and mixed fruits.

Wright is pleased that I can appreciate the terroir differences. He parts with these words, "We may not have the scintillating acids of Burgundy but we do have better acids than most other Pinot Noir producing regions around the world. Moreover, our Pinots have a lush mid-palate and vibrant fresh fruit that does not dry out. Best of all, you don't need to wait to enjoy our Pinots,



1. Oregon's ArcherySummit
2. Mike Etzel
3. Ken Wright

even though they also age well." In the coolness of his tasting room, I drink to that.

#### **BEAUX FRÈRES VINEYARDS & WINERY**

I stand in front of what looks like a huge pile of dirt. To Mike Etzel, it's a two-ton compost heap and the life force of his vines. Already Etzel is scrabbling arm deep in it. He comes up with a handful of warm dark "earth" and invites me to take a sniff. "Better still, stick your head in the hole." I wonder if he is serious. "Doesn't it smell wonderful?" Etzel asks.

Hesitantly I take in a big whiff. Certainly, the "earth" indeed has some floral nuances. I run my fingers through the material and Etzel, a biodynamic practitioner, explains that his compost is made from daisies, chamomile and other plants growing in the nearby field. Here's a man that defies convention, choosing to do things the hard way.

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**SOME WINES TASTED**

The WV boasts over 200 wineries. I visited just a handful of them and found them all exceptional. Certainly, the Pinot Noir and the Chardonnay are especially notable. As these producers are starting to make wines from other varieties, it will only be inevitable that wine lovers will soon enjoy some excellent Pinot Blancs, Rieslings and rosé wines from this charming part of the world.

**ARCHERY SUMMIT PREMIER CUVÉE PINOT 2007**

Bright with cherry, chocolate, jasmine and restrained tannins.

**DUNDEE HILLS PINOT 2007**

Intense perfume of red and black fruit. Big structure, layered with a long finish.

**DOMAINE SERENE ETOILE VINEYARD CHARDONNAY 2007**

Perfumed with florals, white stone fruit, pineapple, pear and almond. Balanced, medium bodied, with chalk and tangy finish.

**EVANSTAD RESERVE PINOT NOIR 2006**

Plum, florals, ripe pomegranate, depth of flavour with earth, cedar, medium tannins, dried herbs and a broad smooth finish.

**DOMAINE DROUHIN ARTHUR CHARDONNAY 2008**

Subtle nose of pear and apple, with flavours of tea and stone fruit. Silky, light citrus finish.

**LAURENE PINOT NOIR 2007 (BARREL SAMPLE)**

Floral, feminine wine with lots of layers, quite different from the concentrated 2006 or the masculine 2005.

**SOTER BEACON HILL BRUT ROSÉ 2005**

Pale pink with small red fruits, ginger and spice. Refreshing.

**MINERAL SPRINGS RANCH PINOT 2008**

Intense with red and dark fruit, clove, orange peel and vanilla. Good balance, fine tannins, and good clarity on finish.

**FIRESTEED PINOT GRIS 2008**

Crisp with green apple and citrus fruit, dry finish.

**CITATION PINOT NOIR 2000**

Nuances of leather, animal and structured but soft tannins, proving Pinots of the region can age well.

**TORI MOR RESERVE PINOT GRIS 2009**

Complex and layered with almond, herbs, pear and a lively tail.

**"DEUX VERRES" RESERVE PINOT 2008**

Perfumed, structured, long and warm with bright cherry flavours and good concentration.

**ELK COVE WILLAMETTE VALLEY PINOT 2008**

Concentrated with currant, cherry and coffee with beautiful texture and adroit balance.

**ELK COVE PINOT BLANC 2008**

White apricot, flowers and minerals; soft acids, sweet velvety texture and clean finish.



To Etzel, all compost is not created equal. However labour intensive, he maintains different heaps for different needs. For example, one compost type is destined as a carbon source for long-term slow release in the vineyard whilst another, rich in nitrogen, is used to ward off phylloxera. "See how healthy our vines look.... And oh, and you might want to wash before we go to lunch — there's some humus somewhere in there too, as this land was a pig farm previously," Etzel remarks humorously.

Etzel founded the Beaux Frères, named after himself and his famous brother-in-law Robert Parker Jr. At lunch (after a thorough hand wash), I compare the 2007 and the 2008 Pinot — both immensely delicious wines. The former has soft tannins and depth of flavours with hints of chocolate and mixed red-black fruits. The latter is lighter with raspberry and minerals and structured tannins. Etzel shares with me that each vintage is starkly different at his estate. He believes that in producing wine, there should be minimal intervention in the winery. And in the vineyard, only physiologically (rather than analytically) ripe grapes are harvested each year. As such, yields are different each year, and every year's "wine is guaranteed to be the most natural and authentic vineyard expression possible." **a**

