

OREGON PINOT NOIR IS READY TO TAKE ON THE WORLD

—James Suckling CEO/Editor, with Evan Mah, managing editor

Friday, November 4, 2016

Early last month I took my first trip to Oregon's Willamette Valley to taste close to 300 pinot noirs with two of my editors. Located 600 miles north of California's Napa Valley, the region is an infant by Old World standards: The first vines were planted in 1965. But in a short time, the wines have done remarkably well in the American market, where most of the production is sold.

Some of that has to do with cost. With a few exceptions, the top wines cost between \$60 and \$100 a bottle. Most hover in the \$30 to \$50 range. They are bargains compared to red burgundy and top California bottlings—an important draw for both young wine lovers on a budget and restaurants looking for bright, food-friendly wines that won't triple the cost of dinner for their customers. Cost doesn't come at the expense of quality either. Oregon pinot is close in flavor profile to Burgundy and less dense and fruity than, say, California or New Zealand's Central Otago. Some regions such as Gippsland, Geelong and Mornington in Australia make similar structured pinots.

All of this, I've known for some time. What I did not know prior to my tasting was just how consistent the wines would be from producer to producer. I rated close to 90 percent of the wines 90 points or more. About 12%, or 36 wines, scored 95 points or more. It helps that the region is coming on-line with a string of excellent vintages, starting with 2014. Most of the wines I scored were from 2014, one of the hottest and driest in memory delivering one of the earliest harvests ever. The grapes picked were in near-perfect condition and yielded wines with generous richness but also an underlying freshness. They had bright and vivid fruit that seemed to hover over the glass with brilliance and verve.

They're crowd pleasers.

DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

CHARDONNAY DUNDEE HILLS ARTHUR 2014

Score
93

This is such a lively white with ripe fruit, mangoes and limes. Then it turns to a salt character. Medium-to full-bodied, racy and intense. Fresh, citrusy finish. Drink now.

DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

CHARDONNAY DUNDEE HILLS ARTHUR 2015

Score
94

A layered and pretty wine with dried apples and fresh fruit. Linear and spicy, showing plenty of salty undertones. Full-bodied, solid and fresh. Lovely intensity. Drink now.



DROUHIN OREGON ROSEROCK

CHARDONNAY EOLA-AMITY HILLS 2014

Score
95

A very pretty texture to this wine with cream and dried apples in addition to hints of lemons and limes. A medium to full body and soft yet bright acidity. Love this fabulous wine. Don't miss it.

DROUHIN OREGON ROSEROCK

PINOT NOIR EOLA-AMITY HILLS 2014

Score
94

This is the first vintage of this wine. Shows intensity and balanced and beautiful fruit. Medium-to full-bodied, silky and beautiful. A really velvety and round texture to this. Drink or hold.



DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

PINOT NOIR DUNDEE HILLS 2014

Score
94

There's a focus and precision to this pinot with refined tannins and beautiful fruit. A medium to full body characterised a firm, polished and tight center palate of fruit and tannins. Drink now.

DROUHIN OREGON ROSEROCK

PINOT NOIR EOLA-AMITY HILLS ZÉPHIRINE 2014

Score
96

A juicy and intense wine with with lots of plum, chocolate and cedar undertones. Full-bodied and velvety. Pretty, gorgeous, racy and just so fine. Love the fruit and texture. Drink now.



DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

PINOT NOIR DUNDEE HILLS LAURÈNE 2013

Score
93

A firm and silky red with pretty tension and texture. Medium-bodied, tight and delicious. Racy and refined. Dried berries, bark and tea. Pretty wine. Drink now.

But pleased isn't exactly how I'd describe Eyrie Vineyards first planted pinot noir vines in the region in 1965. Many of the winemakers who expressed a degree of regret regarding the 2014 vintage. From what I could tell, Oregonians seem to enjoy grappling with, what they call, "normal vintages" when the weather is wet and cool for most of the year, especially during the harvest. There were concerns that 2014's luscious style might dominate the uniqueness of the wines. "Just about anyone can make an outstanding wine in a vintage like 2014," said Tony Soter of Soter Vineyards. Originally from Oregon, Soter made his name in the 1980s and 1990s in Napa Valley making and establishing some of the best names from Spottswoode to Araujo to Shafer. His vineyards at his estate are all admirably biodynamically farmed. "But it's difficult years such as 2013 that show the best vineyards and top winemakers."

Indeed, 2013 was the antithesis of 2014. The growing season looked excellent until a Monsoon-like storm blew across the Pacific from Asia and hammered the region with rain halfway through the harvest. "We harvested excellent grapes before the rain," explained Erik Kramer, the winemaker at Domaine Serene, a leader in the region with about 97 hectares of vineyards near the town of Dundee. Serene makes top single-vineyard bottlings of pinot noir and chardonnay as well as beautiful blends. "The grapes after the rains were still good if you waited and made selections."

Of course, all the moisture created lots of botrytis, or rot, to contend with. Many lost large swaths of their grapes. "I really didn't know what to do with so much botrytis," said one winemaker. "It was very scary. But in the end, we made severe selections, and I was happy with the quality of the wines we bottled."

But many 2013s were very good to outstanding, especially the whites such as chardonnay and pinot gris. The wines remind me of Burgundy with their leanness, acid structure, and fine fruit with a light green edge.

Winemakers say that the 2015 and 2016 vintages will be similar in quality to the 2014, but perhaps a little more Oregonian with less exuberance. Either way, you should buy Oregon wines with little hesitation for the next few years given the trio of superb vintages. If you're wondering whether these wines can age, you're not alone. I had the same question—until I met with Jason Lett at Eyrie Vineyards. Jason's father, David, was the one who planted the first pinot noir vines in the region. As he opened a 1987 pinot from his South Block plot, Jason remarked, "I think this shows the potential for how well Oregon pinot can age."

The wine was striking. It immediately took me back to a grand cru Burgundy I had enjoyed a few weeks prior. To Jason's point, the wine didn't show potential. The wine was the proof.