Oregon

8 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Pinot Noir.

Main grapes: Pinot Noir (red); Pinot Gris (white).

Oregon produces quite a small amount of wine but an awful lot of noise. Which is not at all to say that the state's wine industry is overrun by brash publicists - rather the reverse. The typical Oregon wine operation consists of relatively neat, high-trained vines round a few old wooden shacks manned by a highly educated loner who revels in the contrasts between his wine region and California.

The most obvious difference is the climate, which in most of Oregon is distinctly cool and cloudy, especially in the Willamette (with the emphasis on the short A) Valley just south of Portland, where most of the wineries are clustered. The Willamette Valley is already being carved up into smaller appellations, so local are reputations here. Wine producers like to follow the burgundian model of growing their own grapes. Much is made locally of the fact that Oregon shares the 45th parallel with Bordeaux - although Burgundy would have been more convenient, given the determination with which Oregon wine producers have pursued the Holy Grail of Pinot Noir. This supposedly fickle grape is the state's most planted by far, and there has been much experimentation with different clones, especially so-called Dijon clones from Burgundy. Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and RIesling follow. Oregon has no such thing as cheap, bulk wine of indeterminate pedigree, although although it is now productive enough to have spawned a negociant business, A-Z.

The vine has spread south from the Willamette however to the drier Umpqua Valley, where the first Oregon vines were planted, and the much hotter Rogue Valley in Southern Oregon, a conveniently large AVA almost on the California border (though many miles from any California vineyards). There are also a few vineyards which are effectively extensions of Washington state wine regions. (The Seven Hills vineyard, for example, which is in inland Oregon, is actually part of Washington’s official Walla Walla AVA.) The southern part of the state, the Umpqua and Rogue Valleys are also warm enough to ripen even Cabernet vines consistently, although producers such as Abacela suggest that Tempranillo may have a future here. Basically, the further north you go in Oregon’s coastal vineyards just one mountain range in from the foggy coast, the more open it is to ocean influence, the cooler the vineyards and the more delicate the wines. But only a little further south, in the heart of the Willamette Valley, summer drought can be a problem, strangely enough. Rain at the wrong time is Oregon’s lament .

The perennial challenge for most Oregon wine producers has been to persuade their grapes to ripen fully on the vine before the autumn rains arrive, bringing rot and spoiling the colour and flavours of the delicate Pinot Noir grape especially - although summers seem to be becoming warmer and wines stronger. So variable are the vintages here that the grape harvest may take place at any time from early September to November. Heat stress and drought are not unknown in high summer, however. Despite relatively high rainfall in such a high proportion of the state's vineyards, organic and biodynamic viticulture are more widespread in Oregon than in any other wine region of its size.

Wineries tend to be small family affairs (although Montinore Vineyards and King Estate in the south of the Willamette Valley are exceptions). Winemaking equipment has therefore tended to be fairly homespun, with steel-lined open fruit boxes commonly used as fermentation vats for example. Perhaps the most significant winery is Domaine Drouhin, the only Oregon outpost of a burgundian merchant and, quite rightly, a source of great local pride.

There is more evidence of Oregon's appeal to outsiders in Argyle, a sparkling winemaking venture spearheaded by Brian Croser of Petaluma, arguably Australia's most influential winemaker, and Beaux Frères, a small but successful Pinot Noir producer owned by American wine critic Robert Parker and his brother-in-law.

Long-serving members of the Oregon wine community (and it is very much a community rather than an industry) include Adelsheim, Bethel Heights, The Eyrie Vineyards, Knudsen, Ponzi, Sokol Blosser and Tualatin. Cristom is a noteworthy newcomer which makes a particularly fine Viognier as well as Pinots of distinction. Other superior producers include Archery Summit (owned by a refugee from the Napa Valley), BrickHouse (which is somehow managing to produce concentrated and interesting wines using organic viticulture), Bergstrom, Chehalem, Domaine Serene, Hamacher, Lemelson, and Ken Wright Cellars. All these and more are involved in a uniquely friendly annual winefest known as the

International Pinot Noir Celebration at McMinnville in Yamhill county, just south of the Red Hills of Dundee, Oregon's most famous wine *terroir*.

For many years Oregon growers depended on Swiss and California clones of Pinot Noir which tended to produce wines that were respectively either too facile or too jammy. The big leap forward was taken in the late 1990s when more recently planted Burgundian clones (known here as Dijon clones) came onstream, resulting in more depth of flavour, some savoury notes and better structure for the long term. But Oregon Pinot Gris has long shown real distinction and is really becoming interesting now that new burgundian clones are demonstrating their superior flavour and structure.

There have been experiments with using Oregon oak for wine maturation and it seems unlikely that the idiosyncratic inhabitants of this characterful wine region will stop their quest for ever greater wine quality.

See Oregon Wine for more information on this region.