



It's Willamette, Dammit

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

OREGON



The observant among you may have noticed I didn't have a column last week. I was traveling in Oregon's Willamette (pronounced will-am-it, rhymes with "dammit") Valley and did not have a readily available internet connection (and only spotty cell phone reception) for a couple of days.

Why was I in the Willamette Valley? Well, someone has to do it.

Seriously, I went to Oregon Pinot Camp and spent a couple of extra days visiting wineries and getting an overall lay of the land – which is really why I wanted to go to Pinot Camp in the first place. At least two or three times a month, I'll get a call or an email from someone asking what to do or see in the Oregon wine country. I would always have to answer "I dunno." I hadn't been there. I have lost track of how much time I have spent in Napa and Sonoma in my 30+ years in the wine business. Over the last 14 years, I have spent over 16 weeks in Burgundy and more than that in Bordeaux. I have a driving familiarity with Monterey, Paso Robles, and the Central Coast, not to mention the Rhone Valley, Provence and the south of France, Chile, Argentina, Spain, Germany, even Australia. I've been to eastern Washington State. I've even been to Messina Hof. But I had never visited Oregon.

Several of the Oregon wineries have invited me to Pinot Camp over the last few years but something always got in the way. In two of the last three years, it was VinExpo. So in May of 2009, I blocked out the time on my calendar for 2010 (an non-VinExpo year). That's what it took. By the way, Oregon Pinot Camp is a trade event that many wine loving consumers would love to participate in but as far as I know, it is limited to trade only. Was it worth it? Absolutely. Am I now an expert on Oregon Pinot Noir? Hardly.

But I do know a lot more than I did. Having tasted a lot of carefully organized and presented sample (from different wineries and vintages and soil types), I feel like I now have a good understanding of the stylistic range of Oregon Pinot Noir (and Gris). I have a basic understanding of technique and terroir. Oregon grape growing seems more likely to be sustainable or organic or even biodynamic ... which seems to come from a very strong local environmental ethos. They even use "spudware" (biodegradable utensils made from potato starch and soy oil instead of plastic) instead of plastic knives and forks for catering and picnic events.

Terroir, for those of you who have not been following along, is a combination of soil, orientation, climate, farming practice, cultural bias, and just about anything else local that influences of the flavor of the ripe grapes and subsequently, the finished wine. One of the most important terroir distinctions is soil type. The two most important soils in Oregon Pinot country are red volcanic clays (such as Jory) and ancient seabed sediments over siltstone and sandstone (such as Willakenzie). The Red Hills of Dundee and the Eola Hills sub-AVAs are mostly Jory soils and the Chehalem sub-AVA is mostly Willakenzie soils. As the best sites are on hillsides, exposures vary – but everyone seems convinced they have the best. Virtually all the trellising I saw was "VSP" (vertical shoot positioning) where all the vine growth is trained up using a series of catch wires. There is often some fruit zone de-leafing done on the north or east side of the vine to increase airflow but no de-leafing is done on the south or west side as the leaves are needed to protect the grapes from sunburn.

Typical Oregon Pinot Noir winemaking technique is much the same as small batch winemaking in Burgundy or in California. Grapes are generally picked a bit riper than in Burgundy and a bit less ripe than in California's cooler areas. The fruit is well sorted both in the vineyard and in the winery. Every winery I visited had a triage or sorting table and some had separate tables for sorting the bunches before destemming and the berries afterwards. The grapes with a sometimes large percentage uncrushed berries and sometimes whole clusters (with stems) go in to fermentation tanks for a "cold soak" that might range from 2-3 days to as long as 18 days. This cold soak takes place in part because many of the better wineries don't inoculate with commercial yeasts. Rather, they let the natural yeast present on the skins of the grapes and in the winery start and hopefully finish the fermentations. It can take several days for a natural fermentation to get going. Other wineries use cold rooms, refrigerated trucks, cooling tanks, and even dry ice to keep the not yet fermenting grapes and juice cool so as to get a better cooler extraction and more fresh fruit flavor. The downside of a long cold soak (say over 5 days) is the possibility of sacrificing too much fruit, charm, and terroir specificity to get more richness and weight.

Cap management during fermentation is mostly by pigeage or punching down. There are some Oregon Pinot producers using pump-overs, rack-and-return (delestage), and what some producers called "punch-overs" which use a higher pressure pump-over to effectively pigeage the cap.

Once the fermentation is complete, the wine is generally barreled down and allowed to go through malo-lactic fermentation in barrel. Malo-lactic fermentation is the bacterial conversion of malic (apple) acid into lactic (milk) acid that happens in virtually all red wines and in many white wines. Many of the wineries I visited used gravity flow and some even used gravity rather than pumps for bottling.

All of this is pretty basic and it is also increasingly common in other Pinot producing areas. What is different is the soils and the coolness of the climate. The style of the wines seems to be between Burgundy and say Russian River Valley. In the "classic" years, Oregon splits the difference. In the warmer, riper vintages – the ones the wine press gets gooey over – the style splits the difference between classic Oregon and Russian River – which is to say that the wines can be very "new world". I would not in any case call the Oregon Pinots "Burgundian" but you do hear that term banded about more than a little bit.

ELEVEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT VISITING THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY.

- 1) Remember – It's Willamette (will-am-it), Dammit. (They even put this on t-shirts.) It is NOT "will-a-met". Get it right. They appreciate it.
- 2) Oregonians drive the speed limit – or slower. Get used to it. And their speed limits are lower than those on comparable roads in Texas. And they have LOTS of radar traps. And there is a bad traffic bottleneck at Dundee. We actually saw home made signs and heard popular chatter asking for higher taxes to build better roads.
- 3) There is no sales tax. (Which may explain the lack of road infrastructure.)
- 4) Don't eat the Mexican food. Trust me on this. We saw lots of Mexican Restaurants. There are lots of Mexican ag workers. You'd think ... but you'd be wrong. I tried a few. If Houston and south Texas are your Mexican food reference points, you will be disappointed. And DO NOT order a Margarita.

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- 5) Go to a salmon roast. Salmon roasted on a split alder branch over an open fire is amazing. Trust me. Find a salmon roast and go. And get your salmon as close to when they take it off the fire as possible (seconds count).
- 6) Go to the coast. From McMinnville, it'll take one-and-a-half-to-two-hours to get there but it is worth the drive. The drive is pretty and the Oregon coast is beautiful. And cool. OK, the towns are a bit touristy but they are also quaint and fun.
- 7) Check Out the Evergreen Aviation Museum. For most men, this will be worth a half day by itself. The Spruce Goose (I know, you've seen pictures ... but until you are standing next to it or under it, you just can't get it.) is there along with an amazing array of military aircraft from WWII to the present. I went and I can't wait to go again. If the Mrs. wants a massage or a spa day while you are checking out the war birds, drop her off at the Allison Inn and Spa in Newberg. She'll think you are doing it for her.
- 8) Pinot doesn't just mean Noir. The also have Pinots Gris and Blanc and even a bit of Meunier and Auxerois. Keep an open mind. (The Rieslings are pretty darn good as well.)
- 9) Schedule a hot air balloon ride. You have to get up stupid early but it is worth it.
- 10) Hang out on 3rd Street in McMinnville. Good Shopping. Wine Bars. Good Restaurants; try La Rambla or Nick's. Avoid "Los Molcajetes" (see number 4 above).
- 11) There are lots of bed and breakfasts and plenty of motels. The Allison in Newberg is the nicest hotel and it is very nice indeed. The Comfort Inn in McMinnville is quite serviceable with very comfortable rooms and everything you might want short of room service and a hotel bar (but including a decent breakfast and laundry service along with good free relatively fast internet).

Willamette Valley Wineries I'd Visit

Willakenzie
 Archery Summit
 Domaine Serene
 Lemelson
 Chehalem
 Adelsheim
 Bethel Heights
 King Estate
 Bergstrom
 The Carlton Winemaker's Studio (which houses several "wineries")

Two tasting rooms to visit (not at the winery)

R. Stuart (on 3rd street in McMinnville)
 Ponzi Wine Bar (on 99 in Dundee)

Being There

If you have been reading my columns, you know I've spent about 6 weeks so far this year traveling in the wine country. That's a bit more than normal for me but, given what I do for a living, it isn't excessive. More than half of that time was spent visiting wineries and tasting but much of the rest was spent in offices and in business meetings. So, I probably have a little different take on wine country travel than most. For me, a lot of it is just business travel. Nevertheless, I never forget that visiting Napa Valley in August beats the bejabbbers out of visiting Cleveland in January.

One reason I travel as much as I do has a lot to do with credibility. I suspect that most lunar scientists know more about the moon than Neil Armstrong. However, I know I'd rather listen to Neil Armstrong talk about the moon. He's been there. (I also suspect that most lunar scientists would if not kill at least consider maiming to actually go to the moon.)

I know a lot about wine and a lot of what I know I learned from reading and tasting here in Houston. Nevertheless, the fact that I have spent a lot of time visiting and tasting in the wine country adds to my credibility and my confidence. And I do learn something new (usually a lot of somethings new) every time I visit. There is nothing quite like being there. I mentioned earlier that I had never visited Oregon. Well, now that I have, rest assured – I am already planning to go back.

Blah, Blah, Blah ... or More on the Mexican Food thing

Except in a few cases, I don't have a lot of wine country restaurant recommendations to make. I wind up eating a lot of catered lunches and dinners at wineries and in private homes. When I'm traveling alone, I value the odd evening off so I don't generally go for fancy meals. That means that, as much of a foodie as I am, I am far from an expert on dining out in the wine country. I do have a few favorites. For instance, I really like Bistro Jeanty in Yountville and I am particularly fond of Gott's Roadside (formerly known as Taylor's Refresher) in Napa and St. Helena. I really like Zazu near Santa Rosa. Likewise, I have some favorites in Burgundy (l'Eccusson and Le Gourmandine in Beaune and Castel de Tres Girard in Morey St. Denis) and Bordeaux (Le St. James – actually in Bouliac overlooking Bordeaux- and Bistro des Negoçants). I also have some negative advice about dining out in the wine country. La Tupina – an old favorite in Bordeaux – has disappointed on my last three visits ... although it is almost worth going just for the goose fat-fried potatoes. I have never been fond of Tra Vigne in St. Helena and, while the food is perfectly acceptable steakhouse food, I am tired of Cole's Chop House in Napa.

My best piece of advice is no matter how much you crave it, wait until you get back to Texas to eat Mexican food. California Mexican food is not what you are used to and their Margaritas are just not as good. I sometimes hear Napa wine makers bragging about their taco trucks. Don't you believe it. On my solo nights off, I have tried a lot of highly recommended California Mexican food and been mostly disappointed. Likewise, on this trip to Oregon's Willamette Valley, I tried two Mexican restaurants – including one recommended and the other highly recommended - and came away shaking my head. We tried Margaritas at two places and got something that tasted like a lot of commercial Margarita mix with a little bit of Tequila stirred in. That's "stirred in" as opposed to properly mixed or shaken in. Uhg.

In fact, about the only better-than-just-decent Margarita I have found outside of Texas was at Grand Bar Castan on the waterfront in Bordeaux. It just happens to be owned and operated by two brothers who love Texas blues music. Coincidence? I think not. 🌸

