



I have never been partial to Oregon Februaries. Very little happens during this thankfully short month and the weather is usually lousy enough to really make you start twitching for the arrival of spring. Only 28 days to March. Only 28 days to March. Enough of this type of whining. (Although I would take a moment, due to the retirement of Mr. Baseball, to note that it only seems appropriate that former Red Sox hurler Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd would be the first to step up and say that he would gladly cross the picket line for the opportunity to do 12-16 again. The Can was always a bottle or two shy of a case.)

Unfortunately, Oregon Wineries view February with the same type of enthusiasm as do I. Very little goes on this month, with the notable exception, for you coastal denizens, of the Newport Wine and Seafood Festival; which I have never personally attended but have heard is essentially Newport's answer to having the Jerry Garcia Band play at the local amphitheatre: A weird conglomeration of people all coming for the same thing with wildly divergent reasons, motives and tastes. Given the lack of interesting wineries to putz about at as we await the Ides of March, I am given to rambling about different ongoings in the Oregon wine world and recommendations for surviving the next few weeks.

The harvest of 1994 is now all in barrels and bottles. The scrutiny has been fairly intense from those who pontificate a bit too seriously about wine. The conclusion is that 1994 should be a fantastic year for Oregon wine. The weather was, by and large, excellent although a tad too hot at the end, which created some scrambling just before the harvest. Generalizations are just generalizations though. Good wineries will make good wine even in uneven years, while mediocre wineries will make mediocre wine even given the most advantageous of circumstances. However, what is done is done and expectations are high even amongst skeptics (winery owners).

A few things are certain, or at least pretty certain. The Pinot noir crop is WAY down. This is not a good thing for Oregon's wine industry as a whole. Pinot noir is the wine that drives Oregon's market and a serious reduction in quantity (as much as 50% for some wineries) means lean financial times, less good wine coming in under the magical \$10 mark and the lingering cloud of temptation to get wine out on the market well before it is ready to meet demand and put a few bucks in the bank. I will be reserving judgment on 1994 Pinot noir for quite awhile. The possibilities for deep, rich burgundy are tantalizing but I will not be buying any futures.

At the vineyards I toured this past fall, without exception the fruit that looked the best and tasted the most intense right off the vine was Chardonnay. Chardonnay has the distinction of being, simultaneously, America's most loved and disdained white wine. Loved for its consistency and disdained for being boring. As a part-time trasher of Chardonnay (usually after a couple of good glasses of red wine) I am here to go on record as saying that Chardonnay can be a damn good wine and Oregon has a chance to make some dynamite Chardonnay in 1994. One of the best bottles of wine I had in the past year was a Tualatin 1988 Reserve Chardonnay. It was all pears, honey, spice and richness. This is what I am looking for out of 1994 from Oregon's top white wine producers. Sure, the lean, thin stuff will still be around in abundance, but the cream of the crop should have an extra lair. Put this on the fridge until 1996.

It was hot all over Oregon this summer, especially down south. Could this be the year that Oregon produces some dynamite Bordeaux? There have been occasional good ones but consistency has been lacking and posers have been much too prevalent. Down at **Valley View Vineyards** in Jacksonville they plummeted from 12,000 cases in 1993 to 5,000 in 1994 but Mark Wisnovsky says it is all Anna Maria (their highest designation) and that their Cab/Merlot blend is the best they have made (which is saying a lot, considering that their 1990 Reserve is a magnificent wine). I am trying not to get my hopes up but I really would like to taste some good, moderately priced Oregon Merlot.

I have been lamenting the fact recently Oregon's Bordeaux wines by and large just don't have what it takes sometimes to get you through a cold, rainy weekend. Good Merlot and Cabernet are critical elements to survival at this time of year. During the floods of California last month a person living in a drastically affected area stated to an interviewer, "It's California. We're resigned. Actually we're having a bottle of Cabernet." A perfectly appropriate response to natural disaster. But given the quantity needed one does not want to shell out \$15 or so every time the Bordeaux Blues strike. In a burst of Northwest pride I am willing to recommend looking north of the border for good Bordeaux buys. Good values can be found in the likes of Covey Run, Hogue, Columbia and Hedges. Here in Oregon though there are a couple sub \$10 bottles I can recommend. **Knudsen Erath's 1991 Cabernet** goes for right around \$10 and is

pretty decent, **Oak Knoll** had a 1988 floating around for \$7 that was a total steal and (I am revealing virtually Top Secret information) at a particular store at 14th and SE Belmont a 1992 **Serendipity Cab** can be had for the insanely low price of \$6.29. A few bottles of these with some nice bread and some warmed cheese will warm the soul. We put the seemingly odd combination of challah bread and baked feta together to create a nice snack that teamed well with 5 bottles of Bordeaux.

Okay, February is just a bump in the road and March opens up all sorts of possibilities and wineries. Providing that the new Congress hasn't outlawed having fun if you make less than \$50,000 (and did you know that the Oregon Republicans, the party of the beloved Reverend's choice, met for over 2 hours behind closed doors to discuss introducing a bill or something that would have forbidden women from wearing pants on the floor of the Oregon Senate!? Oh, yeah, these new guys -literally- are really going to make things happen) we will be back out at the vineyards and getting our hands on all sorts of goodies.

I have got a smattering of interesting wines to search out this month. There were no superstars that I ran into but there are a couple of very good deals:

Elk Cove 1992 Late Harvest Riesling: Ooooh, a delicious wine. Sweet and smooth. Elk Cove has always been one of the top producers of late harvest wines and they offer an excellent treat at a wonderful price. Because this wine isn't their Ultima category (\$20 for a half-bottle) they put it in a full-size bottle and slapped a \$10 price tag on it. This well balanced wine is sweet enough to go with a plethora of desserts but I paired it with oysters and a spiced oil dip and came away very happy. Look for this on my end of the year list if it doesn't disappear right away.

Redhawk 1992 Pinot noir: A tip of the hat to Redhawk. I am committed to writing a review of this winery in 1995. Their wines are consistently good, they make quirky things (Chateau Mootom with cows on the label) and have some top end wines that will spin your head around. In this Pinot they have managed to craft my perfect easy drinking red. It distinguishes itself from most Oregon Pinot by showing tons of earth. French Burgundy comes to mind while drinking this little stunner. \$10!?! Pinch me.

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