

TRAILBLAZING WINES

Filling the gaps in Oregon's history

Among the world's wine-savvy folks, there's no doubt that Oregon can produce some of the planet's best wines, especially pinot noir, notoriously tricky to grow, ripen and vinify into the wine that ranks among the most desirable to wine-lovers. Our state's pinot noirs have emerged as distinctive for their depth and complexity but particularly for a certain freshness of flavor that seems to derive from our peculiar land and climate (plus the talents of so many winemakers). As a result, the north end of the Willamette Valley gets a lot of well-earned attention. It looms large on folks' mental wine maps.



There's residual weirdness here. For one, our success has been so complete that we seem to have misplaced pieces of our history, some of which, in its loss, detracts from credit due to pioneers, people who dared and tried and succeeded.

For instance, in the 1960s, Richard Sommer of HillCrest Vineyards in Roseburg and David Lett of Eyrie in Dundee ignored advice from wine pros that insisted that Oregon would be too wet, too cold, to ripen *Vitis vinifera* grapes, the grapes of the great wines of Europe. Sommer was obsessed with riesling, the hugely complex, versatile white wines of mainly Germany and Alsace (note: yes, he made other wines, including pinot noir); he established his vineyard in the shadow of the Callahan Ridge and eventually garnered prizes and praises and, before his passing in 2009, had been honored as a Knight of the Vine. Lett pursued pinot noir — to stunning success — planting in the hills above Dundee in 1965 and earning international recognition and eventually the sobriquet of Papa Pinot. David Lett died in 2008; his son, Jason Lett, took the winemaking reins in 2005, and there has been not the slightest loss of quality in Eyrie wines.

An added weirdness, worth recalling, is that Sommer and Lett had to dare in the face of so much denial when Oregon had already proved it could be hospitable to wine. The first pioneers of the 1800s had brought (or bought, from wagon-drawn nurserymen) their vines, planted and vinified their grapes quite successfully for decades. The great Peter Britt had even established a commercial winery called Valley View in Jacksonville in the 1850s. Prohibition came to Oregon in 1916, four years before the rest of the nation; one provision of the Oregon law demanded that all reference to wine be erased from the histories of our region, a form of ignorance by mandate.

Still, credit where it's due: Sommer and Lett led the way — again. By 1970, Oregon had five bonded wineries; 10 years later, we had 34. Presently, OLCC records indicate that we have more than 400, with more coming. And we're still discovering our best growing sites, even our best grapes.

And we're looking closely at our other valleys, beyond the Willamette, to the Umpqua, Rogue, Columbia and farther. And our best vintners are reaching out:

Doug and his winemaker son Matt LaVelle of LaVelle Vineyards in Elmira trolled the Columbia Valley for cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah to blend **LaVelle 2011 Trilogy** (\$30), a silky-smooth "big red" with flavors of dark berries and a dash of pepper. Their just released **2013 White Pinot Noir** (\$24) is a 'bud-boggling white wine (no "blush" here) with flavor complexity and acute balance. It opens consumers to new discoveries of pinot noir potentials.

Since Richard Sommer's venture into the Umpqua, more than 20 wineries have opened. Wayne and Deady Parker came to the valley in 1996, planted their acreage and later launched Melrose Vineyards. The **Melrose 2012 Riesling** (\$15) would tickle Richard Sommer; it's slightly off-dry, the fruit round, ripe and food-ready.

The Rogue Valley is a broad growing region, supporting more than 20 growers working with more than 40 varieties of grapes. The area is warmer and drier; grapes love it there, particularly warm-climate grapes. One of the best is **RoxyAnn 2010/11 Viognier** (\$20), a crisply dry white, aromatic and bursting with flavors (pears, melon, a citrusy zing), wanting fresh fish, white cheeses, a glass. Peter Britt's legacy is a blessing.

Exploring Oregon wines is not an onerous task. Pioneers have blazed the trails. We merely have to follow their wheel ruts to discoveries of a New World in wines and adventures in flavors. ■

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