

WARMING WINES

Beyond the northern Willamette Valley

Across the wine-y world, Oregon is recognized for its cool climate, hugely hospitable to growing the pinot noir grape, considered by many wine-lovers to be the foundation for the greatest of wines. An indication of the global passion for this wine would have to be the 31st Annual International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC) to be held this July 29-30 on the bucolic campus of Linfield College, McMinnville.

Hundreds of wine-swells will gather to dine in splendor and sample dozens of the finest pinot noir wines from the best growing regions, crafted by the williest growers and most talented winemakers. Some 70 wines will be selected — we'll check the list later this month — from France's Burgundy, New Zealand and Oregon. Yummy glug all.

The best pinot noir wines are characterized by an elegant, delicate complexity of flavors (usually red fruits, sometimes even hints of violets), easy to drink, matching with a wide range of food, finishing with long, lingering memories. Got extra shekels? Try **Raptor Ridge 2012 Estate Pinot Noir** (\$47) — so pretty, so elegant.

But this fixation on pinot noir has some odd consequences: For one, many visitors, including the wine press, seem to have a distorted mental map of Oregon on which the northern Willamette Valley looms large with, maybe, a bulge for the Eola Hills west of Salem, then not much else, and certainly little space given for the warmer regions of our state.

Naturally, if pinot noir is your obsession, you might not care much for regions where pinot noir gets some scorn; for example, wine pioneer Dick Troon (Troon Vineyards), Rogue Valley, said, "We plant pinot noir at the end of the rows to keep the bears out of the good stuff." By "good stuff," Troon meant his beloved 'big' reds — cabernet sauvignon, even zinfandel (he made some of the best ever).

Oregon is a big state, and, like all winemaking states is platted into American viticultural areas (AVAs). The entire Willamette Valley is an AVA, even though the south end of the valley, with its 25 or so strong wineries and their fine wines, gets scant attention from IPNC visitors and the itinerant wine press. That warped mental map has its effects.

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But we have 18 AVAs in Oregon, including some warm-climate areas where excellent wines — that are not pinot noirs — are being produced.

Take the Columbia Valley. Sure, as we noted last month, some Washington Columbia wines are clearly terrific. Just last week, we tasted **Nine Hats 2014 Syrah**, which has rich, dark, flavors of black currants, pepper, even blueberries. Equally impressive was **Mullan Road Cellars 2014 Red Wine Blend**, mainly cabernet with merlot and others, balanced, with soft tannins, smooth and charmingly food-friendly. Both wines originated in the Walla Walla AVA, most of which, oddly, lies in Oregon, near our 18th AVA, now called "The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater," also the source of Oregon's highest rated wines — syrahs.

Many Oregon winemakers are making good use of Columbia Valley grapes, but the Columbia is not our only warm-climate region: the Umpqua and Rogue valleys are yielding impressive wines — whites and reds — usually associated with warmer climates, particularly France's toasty Rhone Valley.

A couple of examples from Oregon's warm-climate regions include wines from the Rogue and Willamette valleys. Jonathan Scott Oberlander, winemaker at J. Scott Cellars, Eugene, makes a yummy red called **Avanté** (\$17), mainly Spain's tempranillo grapes from the Rogue. Another grape, typically grown in Spain, that thrives on the sun-blessed hillsides on the Umpqua Valley yields **Abacela 2015 Albarino** (\$17.50), an excellent dry white, with well-balanced flavors of ripe Asian pears and just a hint of almonds. Oberlander also goes warm-country with the **J. Scott 2014 Viognier** (\$17), a super white.

Jonathan's neighbor in Eugene's Warehouse District also buys grapes from the Rogue, from the superb Quail Run Vineyards: **Noble Estate 2013 Cabernet Franc** (\$36), which seems expensive to us, but the wine is delish. **Noble Estate 2013 Syrah** (\$29), from the same source, is just excellent, lotsa bold, black-fruit flavors, with a dash of pepper.

If our region keeps warming and drying, maybe someday we'll be hosting the International Syrah Celebration, and our visitors' mental maps of our AVAs will have been altered. Maybe they'll hold the celebration in, of all places, Milton-Freewater or maybe even Ashland or Roseburg.

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