


Pinot Noir Finds Favor in Oregon's Willamette Valley, Part One



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The vineyards of Sokol Blosser in autumn in the Willamette Valley. SOKOL BLOSSER

I'll just out and out say it: Overall, Oregon makes the best Pinot Noirs in America. There are, of course, several notable California bottlings well worth savoring, but the terroir of Oregon, particularly the Willamette Valley, seems to possess the perfect aspects of soil and climate to produce Pinot Noirs that rival the better Burgundies.

In his authoritative book *North American Pinot Noir*, John Winthrop Haegar wrote in 2004, "The model for too many American Pinots is too large a wine, made from grapes that are picked too ripe, sporting too much alcohol, struggling for balance in a space in which balance is, in fact, hard to achieve."

Since then there has been progress on all fronts, especially in Northern California's Sonoma Valley, but my assertion still holds true about Oregon's terroirs. It's not surprising that Robert

J. Drouhin of Burgundy's illustrious Maison Drouhin started plantings in Oregon back in the late 1980s, after investigations suggested it would be an ideal terroir to grow Pinot Noir.



Domaine Drouhin is the Oregon spawn of Burgundy's illustrious estate. DOMAINE DROUHIN

I was happily reminded of this on a recent visit to Domaine Drouhin, and it's really a family story. In 1986, Robert' Drouhin's daughter Véronique came to Oregon to work the harvest with three Oregon wine families, the Letts (Eyrie Vineyard), the Casteels (Bethel Heights) and the Adelsheims (Adelsheim Vineyards). Her reports to her father drew him the following year to participate in the first International Pinot Noir Celebration—which has become a premier annual event in the wine world—where he was impressed by the similarities of terroir to his native Burgundy. He thereupon purchased a Christmas tree farm in the Dundee Hills and began planting Pinot Noir, appointing Véronique as winemaker and her brother Philippe head of viticulture. In 1988, Domaine Drouhin produced its first vintage, albeit from grapes purchased from other estates. A year later the fully operational winery was erected, with a four-story gravity flow distilling system.

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Veronique and her brother Philippe oversee the family estate at Domiane Drouhin. DOMAINE DROUHIN

To this day Domaine Drouhin is one of America's finest examples, not because it tastes just like the best Burgundies but because the estate takes full advantage of Drouhin's historic knowledge of a grape often called "finicky" and grows it accordingly in a cool climate terroir—whereas the high temperatures of Napa Valley can often cook the delicate Pinot Noir. Drouhin's success was the kick that gave Oregon bragging rights, for although other wineries had made Pinot Noir, Drouhin's was, and still is, a benchmark that does indeed express the estate's motto, "French soul, Oregon soil." A tasting of recent vintages with Managing Director David Millman corroborated my view that the estate's consistency, finesse and evolution show that breeding counts.



Alison and Alex are the current scions of the Sokol Blosser family winery. SOKOL BLOSSER

I also had the pleasure of visiting Sokol Blosser, which has an older family history—46 years now—dating to a time when vineyards were scarce in the Valley or anywhere else in Oregon.

(There are now 725.) Located on a certified organic, 85-acre planted vineyard in Oregon's Dundee Hills sub appellation, Sokol Blosser Winery was founded by Bill and Susan Blosser in 1971 and is now overseen by their son, Alex, and daughter, Alison, as co-owner and CEO.

Since I last interviewed Alex a year ago in New York, he's become more concerned than ever about climate change in the world's vineyards, especially since Sokol Blosser has always been committed to the environment and sustainability. "Global warming is scary," he said. "I really don't know what to do, except to be as aggressive as we can with the politicians in an effort to slow the roll of what seems at this point inevitable."



Many unique varietals are sold directly at the Sokol Blosser tasting room in the Dundee Hills of the Willamette Valley. sokol BLOSSER

Sokol Blosser makes a very wide range of wines, sometimes from other vineyards' grapes, the reason being, simply, that "there's a market for them," not least at the winery's beautiful hilltop tasting and sales room and through on-line marketing and sales. He described how "volcanic soil makes great Pinot Noir at higher elevations, but below 300 feet the soil is full of calcium and produces very vigorous vines, which in turn make for good but not great Pinot Noir." But such soils are good for other varietals, so Sokol Blosser also makes estimable Pinot Gris, Riesling and Chardonnay to a nine-grape blend in magnum called Evolution. It even makes a Müller-Thurgau, a German cross-breed of Riesling and Sylvaner, which is highly unusual in Oregon.

“We make some of our wines, like the Pinot Gris, as experiments,” he said, “to learn what works.” On the other hand, those “very vigorous vines” of Pinot Noir are ideal for Rosé of Pinot Noir. “I farm for rosé,” he said, “and the grapes achieve 21 Brix [sugar content] to retain that essence of Pinot Noir flavor at 12% alcohol. We plant in very vigorous soil that gives us lots of tons per acre, all certified organic.”



Evolution is a Sokol Blosser wine made from nine different grapes. SOKOL BLOSSER

But Sokol Blosser's reputation is solidly built on well-balanced Pinot Noirs. The 2015 I tasted that day had wonderful aromatics along with the richness of fruit and the brightness of acid. "The most important component in Pinot Noir is acid; complexity hangs on that acid," he said, differentiating the styles of Pinot Noir: "In France the earthiness of their wines make for a softer, rounder texture and more minerality. In California, Pinot Noir is picked in September or October to make a heavier, showy style. The riper the grape the more phenolics, the sugar goes up and ferments into higher alcohol. Here in Oregon, we're in the middle, between France and California. We don't have the former's soil but we don't get California's heat. Our summers are drier—last year we had two weeks of snow on the ground—so we treat the grapes more delicately, and we harvested in August last year."

There are dozens of high quality Pinot Noirs coming out of the Willamette Valley now—I'll be writing about some others next week—and they are proudly Oregonian in style, which is all about balance and, from estate to estate, a personality that comes first from the soil, then, so often, from the family.

John Mariani is an author and journalist of 40 years standing, and an author of 15 books. He has been called by the Philadelphia Inquirer, "the most influential food-wine critic in the popular press" and is a three-time nominee for the James Beard Journalism Award. For 35 ye... MORE