Decanter

Oregon Chardonnay: Top 12 to try

That it's such a draw for so many Burgundians of note is sufficient to tell you that Oregon's Willamette Valley is a developing wine region to be followed, and still a land of discovery. Charles Curtis MW highlights his pick of the producers, along with 12 great wines to try

Charles Curtis MW
August 5, 2020

Once reviled, **Chardonnay** is today the secret weapon in **Oregon's** winemaking arsenal. Wine lovers searching for a crisp, fresh white that can age have traditionally turned to Burgundy. But with the popularity of white Burgundy exploding and prices soaring (especially with the effect of tariffs in the US), many are looking at alternatives. And Oregon might just fit the bill. Although the Willamette Valley is nearly halfway around the world from Burgundy, there are striking similarities. One in particular: wines made from Chardonnay in both places can be shockingly good.

Similar but different

The fundamental reasons for the association owe more to chance than to geology. Robert Drouhin was an early convert. In the 1970s, the then-head of Maison Joseph Drouhin in Burgundy had been introduced to Oregon wine and organised a comparative tasting in Burgundy. By 1986 he had convinced his newly graduated daughter Véronique to intern in Oregon.

They organised internships at Bethel Heights, The Eyrie Vineyards and Adelsheim. These wineries were among the pioneers of the Oregon wine industry. In 1970, there were only five commercial wineries in the state; today there are more than 700. It was Adelsheim that alerted Robert Drouhin to the availability of the vineyard site in Dundee Hills that in 1987 became **Domaine Drouhin Oregon**.

Véronique Drouhin is quick to point out both similarities and differences between her native Burgundy and Oregon: 'It's a cool climate – that is the reason we went to Oregon – but the volcanic soil is so different.' For her, it was an experience of discovery. The initial Drouhin estate was in the Dundee Hills AVA on a type of volcanic soil called Jory. Early Oregon vintners prized the Jory soils, which gave a distinctive elegance to the wines. 'But I wouldn't say minerality,' remarks Drouhin. 'That belongs to Chablis.'

For the next Drouhin project, called Roserock, Drouhin acquired land in Eola-Amity Hills AVA, just to the east of a break in the Coast Range known as the Van Duzer Corridor. The soils are shallower, but they are also complex – in addition to Jory, there are Nekia soils, a mixture of marine sedimentary and alluvial material. Unlike the Dundee Hills, it is open to the cooling influence of the Pacific ocean through that gap in the mountains. This combination of soil and climate provides a perfect terroir for growing Chardonnay.

Personal connections

One touchstone for Chardonnay here is the Seven Springs Vineyard, planted in 1984 by Al MacDonald. In 2007, ownership passed to a group that included Hollywood director Mark Tarlov, restaurateur Danny Meyer and Burgundy's Domaine Jacques Prieur. This team formed the winery Evening Land, run today by sommelier Rajat Parr and winemaker Sashi Moorman. Parr believes in the site. 'I said to Sashi: "This is the hill of Corton – we have to plant this whole hill to Chardonnay".' Evening Land makes three Chardonnays here. One is blended from blocks throughout the vineyard, and two are site-specific to a particular vein of volcanic soil.

Dominique Lafon of Meursault was also quick to recognise the potential. He began to consult for Evening Land in 2007. He explains that at that time, producers of Chardonnay looked for very ripe fruit. Dissatisfied with the wines, he pushed his reluctant owners to pick earlier. When he harvested Chardonnay as he liked, Lafon found the results surprisingly good: 'I said, oh my God, this is amazing! This has tension, this has balance, this is fresh, this is pure – this is incredible!'

Master Sommelier Larry Stone managed Evening Land during Lafon's consultancy. He left when he had the opportunity to purchase the property across the street, and began to plant grapes intending to sell the fruit. Lafon joined him as a consultant in 2015, convincing Stone to launch a winery to vinify the fruit himself. Their joint project, called Lingua Franca, was born. Lafon is pleased with the results, which he finds very close to Burgundy. 'We have the same type of pH we have in Burgundy, even more so for Chardonnay than for Pinot Noir,' he says.

Lafon also encouraged Jean-Nicolas Méo to begin a West Coast adventure of his own. In 2012 Méo was approached by LA record executive Jay Boberg about a project in Oregon. Two years later, they produced their first vintage under the **Nicolas-Jay** label. At first, they planned to buy grapes, but a vineyard came up that was too good to pass up: Bishop Creek. Located in Yamhill-Carlton, it proved ideal. The south-facing site was planted in the 1980s and produces relatively mature fruit. Méo sees great potential here: 'Oregon Chardonnay is really restarting with a style of its own, not at all following the California guidelines but experimenting along a Burgundian track.'

Between the Burgundian invasion and the one from California, a diverse array of Chardonnay styles exist in Oregon. One thing is certain: consumers who love Chardonnay that is racy, lean and mineral but still concentrated are spoiled for choice. Producers that err on the side of lusciousness may be missing the point, but those who keep it fresh and don't overdo the oak merit your full attention.

Oregon: 10 names to know

00 Wines

Wine-loving lawyer Chris Hermann decided to produce Chardonnay in 2015, founded Double Zero with his father, a professor at Oregon State University, and hired Burgundy-based consultant Pierre Millemann to create a range of wines. The flagship VGW (Very Good White) has the largest production at about 1,000 cases. The EGW (Extra Good White) uses some old-vine fruit, and the superb Freya Hermann Cuvée is a single-vineyard wine from Seven Springs Vineyard. The style of the wines is slightly reductive and generously wooded, reminding many of the wines of Coche-Dury.

Antica Terra

Winemaker Maggie Harrison, formerly of Sine Qua Non, takes the lead on this Oregon project. She uses Chardonnay sourced from the Shea Vineyard and four other sources to create a luxurious, exuberant style. She makes a strict selection of the fully ripe fruit, presses gently and carefully ferments in cask, through full malolactic and generous ageing. The top wine, Aequorin, is rare but worth the search.

Bergstrom

Oregon local Josh Bergström completed wine studies in Beaune before returning to establish a vineyard with his family. Today they own nearly 30ha of vineyards in the Ribbon Ridge, Chehalem Mountains and Dundee Hills AVAs, all biodynamically farmed. There is no sulphur used in the winery and very little new wood. The style is pure, clean and fresh.

Domaine Drouhin

Véronique Drouhin was one of the original Burgundian pioneers of the Willamette Valley, arriving in 1986. She still makes the wines and her brother Philippe manages the vineyards, which include more than 50ha, all certified as sustainably farmed. The fruit is whole-cluster-pressed and gently fermented, half in cask and half in tank. For the Domaine Drouhin bottling, the malolactic fermentation is blocked for the tank-fermented portion so that the wine retains a vibrant freshness.

Domaine Serene

This renowned Pinot Noir producer launched its lauded Chardonnay programme with the purchase of the Côte Sud vineyard in Dundee Hills in 1997. Now it has nearly 30ha planted to the grape. The wines are produced in a dedicated gravity-flow winery and include five single-vineyard Chardonnays and two wines blended across different vineyards.

Evening Land

Initially planted in 1984 with own-rooted vines, Evening Land has been considerably retooled by sommelier Rajat Parr, winemaker Sashi Moorman and their partners. The Chardonnay from their iconic Seven Springs Vineyard is a reference throughout the state. Their two single-parcel bottlings called La Source and Summum are as close to the concept of lieu-dit as you will get in Oregon.

Lavinea

Quebec-native winemaker Isabelle Meunier worked with Pascal Marchand at Domaine de la Vougeraie and Dominique Lafon at Evening Land, from where she left to found Lavinea in 2014. Continuing to work close to the Burgundian model, she produces a Chardonnay from Elton Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills and another from Lazy River in Yamhill-Carlton.

Lingua Franca

Master Sommelier Larry Stone has set up shop across the street from Evening Land in Eola-Amity Hills. The Janzen Ranch that he bought in 2012 is adjacent to the Seven Springs Vineyard and shares a similar terroir. Dominique Lafon joined as the consulting winemaker in 2015, with
Thomas Savre working alongside him locally. The wines are crisp, precise and as thrilling as anything in the region.

Nicolas-Jay

The Oregon collaboration between Jean-Nicolas Méo of Vosne-Romanée and music industry executive Jay Boberg. With local winemaker Tracy Kendall they produce two Chardonnays, including the single-vineyard, estate-grown wine from Bishop Creek – their vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton. Nicolas-Jay has recently bought property in the Dundee Hills for a new winery, which will open for the 2020 vintage.

Walter Scott

The thriving new venture launched by wine salesman-turned-vintner Ken Pahlow and his wife Erica Landon. The pair started in 2009 with 600 cases and now produce 10 times that from some of the most prestigious sites in Oregon, including Seven Springs, Freedom Hill and others. The style here is concentrated and citrussy, with strong saline notes – the most Chablis-like wine.

Nicolas-Jay, Bishop Creek, Willamette Valley, Oregon, USA, 2018

SINGLE

+ Add to My Wines

D

Tasted by Charles Curtis MW
Part of **Oregon Chardonnay: Top 12 to try**

TASTING SCORE 92

A superb example of the whites from this project. The vines at the top of this slope on Bishop Creek estate were only recently budded over from Pinot Gris to Chardonnay, but the results are marvellous, with a luxurious ripe-apple fruit and a leesy hint of spice. Rewarding freshness and length on the palate – it's a wine that will age.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030