PREMIUM

Oregon Pinot Noir: top producers to know and wines to try

With its distinctive soils and innovative planting and winemaking trends, this corner of the Pacific Northwest has found great success with Burgundy's temperamental red grape. Charles Curtis MW shares his top Oregon Pinot Noir producers to know and the best wines to buy.

Charles Curtis MW
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The success of recent bottlings from many producers shows that, while this is true, limestone and marl aren't necessarily part of the equation. These soil types, found in **Burgundy**, simply don't exist in the Willamette Valley.

Terroir types

Limestone is a type of rock formed over millions of years by marine sediment. The oldest soils in Oregon, such as Willakenzie, were formed in the same way, but they do not have the same calcium-rich nature as their Burgundian relatives because they are derived from accretions of sandstone, not calcium-rich marine organisms.

In Oregon, the picture is further complicated by volcanic soil types such as Jory and Nekia, composed of basalt from lava that flowed out of what is today the Cascade mountains.

The Dundee Hills AVA and the Eola-Amity Hills AVA have mostly volcanic soils, with marine sediments at lower elevations, while the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, Ribbon Ridge AVA and McMinnville AVA have mostly marine sedimentary soils. The Chehalem Mountains AVA has both types.

Climate

Oregon is still temperate in terms of climate, but temperatures have been rising, as they have across the world. 2016 was warm and sunny, but 2017 had a cool onset and a cool September that delayed picking. 2018 was warm and dry, but 2019 was back to cool and relatively wet. 2020 was dry and warm, but the evenings were cool. The region appeared set for a fabulous harvest when apocalyptic wildfires struck. The fires' final effect on wine quality is still being assessed.

Clones

One of the most discussed issues is the selection of clonal material for planting the vineyards. Many of the early vineyards were planted with clones isolated by the University of California Davis campus, while later vineyards were often planted with a variety from France known collectively as Dijon clones.

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Different clones emphasise different characteristics in the fruit, such as aroma, sugar production, resistance to botrytis and yield, and each winemaker will have a preference.

Bree Boskov MW, who works with the Oregon Wine Board, notes: 'The current trend is planting at higher elevations and with a more diverse selection of clones, in particular the **California** heritage selection more than the sugar-loading Dijon clones, which are increasingly less suited as the climate warms.'

Winemaking trends

Other trends include the adoption of organic and biodynamic methods, although some prefer the sustainable approach typified by the local LIVE certification (Low Input Viticulture and Enology).

Some are returning to fermentation in concrete tanks. Most have a view on using whole bunches in the fermentation, although the practice isn't as widespread as in Burgundy. Opinions also differ on the level of new oak use in maturation, some opting for neutral oak or even amphorae.

All this exploration is yielding interesting answers – and delicious wine.

Oregon Pinot Noir producers: the leading names to know

Evesham Wood

Proprietor Erin Nuccio and his wife purchased Evesham Wood from founders Russ and Mary Raney in 1986. The estate is centred on the vineyard called Le Puits Sec, which is just under 5ha. The site is located on the eastern ridge of Eola-Amity Hills, and Nuccio produces wine from the estate vineyard and from purchased fruit from top sources in the Willamette Valley. The Pinot Noir is normally punched down twice daily, and there is usually an inclusion of whole clusters that varies according to the vintage and the vineyard. Ageing is typically in 25% to 30% new casks from François Frères.

Beaux Frères

Beaux Frères ('brothers-in-law') was founded in 1986 by Robert Parker Jr and his wife's brother Mike Etzel. The wines today are made by Etzel's son, also named Mike but called Mikey. After an initial formation with his father, Mikey gained experience in Europe and the Willamette Valley, returning to Beaux Frères in 2015 after helping to launch Chapter 24 with Louis-Michel Liger-Belair and Mark Tarlov. The home vineyard is a 9.7ha site in the marine sedimentary soils of Ribbon Ridge AVA.

Archery Summit

The volcanic soils of the Dundee Hills are home to Archery Summit and its five vineyards, totalling over 40ha. The estate was founded in 1993 by well-known Napa Valley producer Gary Andrus of Pine Ridge, and Ian Burch makes the wines in cellars carved from the basalt. Burch uses about 30% whole clusters in the fermentation and practices gentle extraction and moderate use of oak to achieve an elegant result.

Division

Division Winemaking Co was founded in 2010 by Kate Norris and Tom Monroe. The winery is located in Portland, Oregon, and sources grapes from throughout the Willamette Valley and further afield. While the emphasis is on Pinot Noir, there are also solid offerings featuring Gamay, Chenin Blanc, Malbec and other grapes. Working with organic and biodynamic growers where possible, Norris and Monroe use minimal intervention to produce fresh, delightful wines bursting with fruit.

Eyrie Vineyards

Pioneer David Lett and his wife founded the Eyrie Vineyard in 1966 in the Dundee Hills. The first vintage was 1970, and it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of their work introducing Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris in US vineyards. Today Lett's son Jason continues the tradition of his father, picking grapes to retain freshness, fermenting on native yeasts and using little if any new wood for the ageing of the wines to produce a style that emphasises finesse and eschews overextraction and concentration. Chardonnay from the Eyrie Vineyard is equally lovely.

Cristom

Cristom Vineyards was founded in the Eola-Amity Hills region in 1992 by the Gerrie family. There are now more than 35ha of vineyards on the cool east-facing ridge of the Eola-Amity Hills. The vineyards are certified as sustainably farmed, and organic and biodynamic techniques are used. Wines are produced in the Burgundian mould, with native yeast ferments, a high percentage of whole clusters, and ageing for 18 months in cask before bottling. The wines balance concentration with ethereal qualities.

Penner-Ash

Winemaker Lynn Penner-Ash and her husband Ron founded this estate in 1998 in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, home to their 6ha estate vineyard. Although the estate was sold to Jackson Family Estates in 2016, the quality focus continues, and wines from many of Oregon's most renowned sites throughout the Willamette Valley are now produced. Today, the wines are made by Kate Ayers in small fermenters with a limited cold soak and gentle punching down before cask ageing.

Brittan Vineyards

Robert Brittan and his wife Ellen founded their eponymous property in 2004 in the McMinnville AVA. After replanting some existing vines (retaining some of the rare clonal material), Brittan expanded to include Rhône varietals. Although Brittan spent two decades making wine in the Napa Valley, the wines here are unique to their place and made with a sensitive hand to emphasise the purity of fruit and appealing freshness of the place. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are both exciting.

Résonance

Beaune-based négociant Maison **Louis Jadot** founded Résonance Wines in 2013, assisted by its winemaking emeritus Jacques Lardière. Jadot put a top-flight team in place, led by Guillaume Large, the former second to Jadot's Beaune winemaker Frédéric Barnier. The home vineyard consists of ungrafted vines planted in 1981, while organically farmed, unirrigated vineyards in Yamhill-Carlton AVA provides top-level fruit for this exciting expansion. As in Beaune, grapes are destemmed and extraction is gentle, with long ageing in Cadus barrels with a modest proportion of new casks.

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Hyland Estates

The own-rooted vines of the Hyland Vineyard were planted in 1971 in what would become the McMinnville AVA. Fully exposed to the cooling influence of the Van Duzer Corridor winds, the site spans more than 70ha of primarily south-facing slopes. It is planted to many clones that range from old UC Davis material to modern vines imported from Burgundy. The winery, owned by Laurent Montalieu, Danielle Andrus, John Niemeyer and Jeff Meader of the Northwest Wine Co, was recently sold to a local Oregon private equity firm, but the team remains in place.

Nicolas-Jay

Nicolas-Jay is the Oregon collaboration between Jean-Nicolas Méo of Vosne-Romanée and music industry executive Jay Boberg. With local winemaker Tracy Kendall, they produce the single-vineyard, estate-grown Pinot Noir from their Bishop Creek Vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton AVA as well as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay blended from different sites in the Willamette Valley. Among their specialties is Own-Rooted, a blend of old-vine fruit from ungrafted vines in different sites. The elegance of Méo-Camuzet comes through clearly in Jean-Nicolas' Oregon project.

Oregon producers noted for both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay

00 [Double Zero]

Wine-loving lawyer Chris Hermann decided to take the plunge and produce Burgundy-inspired wines beginning with the 2015 vintage. He and his wife work with 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. The whites are inspired by Coche-Dury, while the delicious Pinot Noirs pay homage to Domaine Leroy.

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. Pinot Noirs are equally hedonistic – and just as sought after.

Bergström

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 – more than 50ha, all certified as sustainably farmed. The whites are 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. The red wines, as in Burgundy, are destemmed and gently extracted before ageing in cask.

Domaine Serene

The Evenstad family initially won acclaim for their Pinot Noirs from the Dundee Hills. With the purchase of the Côte Sud vineyard in 1997, this renowned producer launched its lauded Chardonnay program. Now Domaine Serene has nearly 30ha planted to this grape. The wines are produced in a dedicated gravity-flow winery and include a full complement of single-vineyard wines from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, in addition to wines blended from various estate vineyards. The style is lush, sensual and substantial.

Evening Land

Initially planted in 1984 with own-rooted vines, Evening Land has been considerably retooled by sommelier Raj Parr, winemaker Sashi Moorman and their partners. The Chardonnay from their iconic Seven Springs Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills AVA is a reference throughout the state. Their two single-parcel bottlings, La Source and Summum, are as close to the concept of lieu-dit as you will come in Oregon. Pinot Noirs are equally precise. Superb value in Oregon wine.

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 purchased in 2012 is adjacent to the Seven Springs Vineyard and shares a similar terroir. Dominique Lafon joined as the consulting winemaker in 2014, with Thomas Savre working alongside him locally. The wines are crisp, precise and as thrilling as anything in the region. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are equally successful at this solid address.

Walter Scott

Walter Scott is 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 they source 10 times that amount from some of the most prestigious sites in Oregon, including Seven Springs, Freedom Hill and others. The Chardonnay style here is concentrated and citrusy, with strong saline notes – the most Chablis-like wine you will find in the Willamette Valley – while the Pinot Noirs are structured, firm and dense.

Oregon Pinot Noir: Charles Curtis MW's pick of the top wines to buy

Walter Scott, Sojeau Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon 2019

According to Ken Pahlow, Sojeau is the 'Musigny of Eola-Amity Hills'. Planted to Pinot Noir clones

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Pommard, Wädenswil, and 115, this unique site is incredibly rocky. It has been certified organic for twelve years, and the high altitude produces wines of lovely tension and power. This vintage has an

Points 97

00 Wines, VGR Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2019

The VGR (Very Good Red) from 00 Wine is an extraordinary American Pinot Noir. UC-Davis clone fruit from the Shea Vineyard and the Hyland vineyard is blended together. The bunches are destemmed berry-by-berry and the intact fruit does a carbonic maceration in sealed terracotta

Points 96

Domaine Serene, Grace Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Dundee Hills, Oregon, 2018

Produced from one of the Evenstad's first plantings in 1996. Mostly clones 667 and 777, the fruit today shows a nuanced nose of red and black fruit accented with aromas of fresh flowers, a bit of earth, and just a hint of oak spice. The beautiful velvet texture has an...

Points 96

Evening Land, La Source Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon 2019

La Source is produced from the vines at the top of the property at over 200m elevation. The structure is firmly tannic from a bit of stem inclusion. Still, for the most part, the winemaking is smoothly polished and preserves an exuberant fruit while delivering a firmly concentrated wine

Points 96

Evesham Wood, Cuvee J Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2018

This marvelous bottling is a barrel selection of the best lots from the Le Puits Sec vineyard. Initial impressions include smoky notes of black plum and a bit of mint. The overall impact is a bit fatter and lusher than most of the Evesham Wood offerings. Although the Francois Freres...

Points 96

Nicolas-Jay, Own Rooted Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

This exciting blend showcases three sites planted on their own roots: the Hyland Vineyard in McMinnville, the Nysa Vineyard in Dundee, and the estate's own Bishop Creek site in Yamhill-Carlton. The fruit is destemmed and fermented on native yeasts before aging over two winters in

Points 96

Walter Scott, X Novo Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2019

Planted by Napa transplant Craig Williams in 2010, X Novo is located on the east-facing slopes of Eola-Amity Hills in decomposed basalt soils of the Gelderman series. Williams planted more than a dozen different clones of Pinot in less than a hectare, which Ken Pahlow of Walter Scott has

Points 96

00 Wines, Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, 2019

The first vintage from this site, which has south and southwest facing sloped planted to UC Davis clones back in 1968 by Dick Erath. The terroir is geologically related to Ribbon Ridge, and it delivers smoky and super-ripe results on the nose. There is a lovely density of black plummy...

Points 95

Antica Terra, Antikythera Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2018

Harrison has produced this wine every year thus far from the Antica Terra Vineyard, although this is not a given. The site is 4.5 hectares of old vine fruit and another two hectares of young vines, all planted in ancient marine sediment soils that produce impressive intensity and tannic structure....

Points 95

Bergström, Silice Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, 2019

Produced from twenty-year-old vines in the deep, sandy soils of the Chehalem Mountain AVA. Although it is not certified, it is farmed with organic and biodynamic methods to yield a ripe, lush plum and blackberry fruit that delivers plenty of richness and loads of grippy tannins and hints of

Points 95

Domaine Drouhin, Cuvée Louise Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Dundee Hills, Oregon, 2015

This bottling is Veronique Drouhin's selection of her favourite barrels from the Dundee Hills production. The fruit is destemmed and gently fermented before aging in cask for fifteen months (20% new). Tasted recently, the wine is starting to mature, with the colour bricking a bit on the rim and the...

Points 95

Evesham Wood, Sojeau, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2018

This high-elevation vineyard at the southern edge of Eola-Amity Hills faces west, upslope from the Eola Springs Vineyard. The elevation delivers elegance and refreshing acidity despite the warm, dry year and the result has a pronounced plum and redcurrant fruit with floral notes and a lovely

Points 95

Eyrie Vineyards, Sisters Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

The south-facing Sisters Vineyard in the Dundee Hills, planted in 1987 to UC Davis clones of Pinot Noir, ripens fruit well to give a full expression to ripe black cherry fruit with hints of violets, mineral, earth, and spice. Even in a warm year such as 2018, the wine retains...

Points 95

Nicolas-Jay, L'Ensemble Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

L'Ensemble is the selection of the best barrels from across the favoured vineyards where Nicolas-Jay sources grapes, including the estate Bishop Creek. These are not pre-selected, but chosen anew each year. The 2018 selection shows off the ripe, black fruit of the vintage with an appealing savoury, meaty character and...

Points 95

Résonance, Resonance Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Yamhill-Carlton, Oregon, 2018

The Resonance Vineyard is a treasure, with the own-rooted Pommard clone Pinot Noir planted in 1981, along with later plantings of Wädenswil and Dijon clone 777, all certified organic. The fruit is destemmed and gently extracted before long aging to produce this wine with pronounced aromas

Points 95

Walter Scott, Sequitur Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Ribbon Ridge, Oregon, 2019

This wine is made with grapes from the personal vineyard Mike Etzel of Beaux Freres in Ribbon Ridge AVA, planted to various clones. The Walter Scott fruit comes from the Lavender Block and the Rosemary Block. The ancient marine sediments have given the fruit aromas a very polished, elegant

Points 95

Antica Terra, Botanica Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

Produced from a blend of sites, including the Hyland Vineyard, Temperance Hill, and two blocks in Seven springs. Harrison blends the lots blind, and no lots are automatically included. The result this year featured a bright cherry and pomegranate fruit with a rich, somewhat imposing presence on the palate and...

Points 94

Beaux Frères, Belles Soeurs Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Ribbon Ridge, Oregon, 2019

From its origin as a Shea Vineyard bottling, Belle Soeur has transitioned to a blend fruit from the Beaux Freres, Upper Terrace, and Sequitur, all farmed by Mike Etzel. Today the grapes are picked earlier, and the extraction managed more gently to give a classic red fruit nose with spice...

Points 94

Bergström, Bergström Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Dundee Hills, Oregon, 2019

This is a delicious wine with a smoky, concentrated edge and intense aroma of black and red berry fruit character with a pronounced earthy side but without any vegetal under-ripe qualities. The grapes are from the Bergström vineyard, planted in 1999. Most of the fruit is fermented without

Points 94

Division Winemaking Co, Pinot Noir Deux, Eola Springs, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2019

This wine is a beautiful value. Produced from the 'Farmhouse Block' of the Eola Springs Vineyard, planted in 1972, the own-rooted old vines deliver seductively ripe curranty fruit that is exuberant but not too sweet. The aromas are coloured with a bit of spice, but the oak does not dominate....

Points 94

Domaine Drouhin, Laurene Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Dundee Hills, Oregon, 2018

The 2018 Laurene displays the ripe, lush qualities of the vintage with a concentrated plummy aroma on the initial attack and a noticeable but well-integrated influence from the cask aging. The palate shows lovely density balanced by a refreshingly crisp acidity - surprisingly so for the vintage. This

Points 94

Domaine Serene, Jerusalem Hill Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2018

At a lower elevation than the sites in the Dundee Hills, the Jerusalem Vineyard is cooled by the breezes of the Van Duzer Corridor to bring this wine more tannin and grip. The fruit is dark blackberry and plum with an almost meaty, savoury aspect and a slightly 'sauvage' edge....

Points 94

Evening Land, Seven Springs Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2019

This wine opens with a reasonably deep colour and a pronounced raspberry and blackberry fruit with some noticeable influence from cask aging on the nose. The fruit is carefully destemmed and then fermented in semi-carbonic maceration in a sealed concrete vat to bring an 'infusion' in emulation of Clos Rougeard...

Points 94

Nicolas-Jay, Bishop Creek Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Yamhill-Carlton, Oregon, 2018

The first estate vineyard in the Nicolas-Jay joint venture is Bishop Creek, located in Yamhill-Carlton AVA and planted on its own roots in 1988 and 1990. Jean-Nicolas Meo and his Oregon winemaker Tracy Kendall have produced a winning result in 2018, with ripe red and black cherry aromas, a

Points 94

Résonance, Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

Delightful, with bright, lively fresh red fruit and floral aromas produced from the long, slow fermentation of the destemmed fruit (half organic estate grapes and half sourced from partner growers). The first project for Maison Louis Jadot outside Burgundy, the philosophy of preferring to

Points 94

Archery Summit, Summit Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Dundee Hills, Oregon, 2019

From the Summit Vineyard where the winery sits, this is a wine of evident concentration. On the attack, it shows dense lashings of new oak spice that give a bit of sweetness, yet there is still plenty of ripe red currant and pomegranate fruit and a firm mineral note as...

Points 93

Penner-Ash, Zena Crown Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Eola-Amity Hills, Oregon, 2019

Penner-Ash sources a fair number of blocks of the landmark Zena Crown vineyard, mostly at pretty high elevation. Most of the fruit is destemmed, and the cold maceration is being reduced to manage the extraction and assure elegance and vibrancy. The freshness and structure is achieved here,

Points 93

Brittan Vineyards, Cygnus Block Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

From this cool site in McMinnville, Robert Brittan has produced this lovely, restrained Pinot Noir. The fruit is given a cold maceration and a bit of whole bunch inclusion before fermentation, and the winemaking aims for an elegant, balanced extraction. Success is evident in the nuanced black

Points 92

Domaine Divio, Clos Gallia Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2018

Burgundy native Bruno Corneaux produces his flagship Domaine Divio from just over nine hectares in the Ribbon Ridge AVA, planted to a mix of clones at different elevations to produce the required complexity. Vine material includes older UC Davis clones and modern Dijon clones; the result has a seductive high-toned...

Points 92

Gran Moraine, Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Yamhill-Carlton, Oregon, 2019

Produced in the estate vineyards in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, the 2018 vintage from Gran Moraine is a bit reserved initially with a bit of smoky reduction. Yet, with time a bright, pure raspberry and black cherry fruit develop with a pronounced mineral cast and interesting complexity of savoury

Points 92

Roco, Stalker Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2019

The Stalker is produced from fruit from the Wit's End vineyard in the Chehalem Mountains. The fruit is destemmed, but the berries are kept whole, and the stems are preserved under inert gas while the fruit does an extended cold soak are added back to the grapes before fermentation. The...

Points 92

Solena Estate, Grande Cuvée Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, Oregon, 2019

Originally this was a blend of all the fruit from the Solena estate, but now it encompasses all the vineyards that Laurent Montalieu owns, including those in Southern Oregon. The wine upholds a very high standard considering the size of the production (7,000 cases). The fruit is initially a bit...

Points 92

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