



# GAME OF thrones

**If Napa Valley is considered the King of American Cabernet Sauvignon, why can't the Willamette Valley be crowned Queen of US Pinot Noir?**

*Roger Morris reports on a coronation in the making*

**OUTSIDE THE** swanky Allison Inn & Spa in Newberg, Oregon, a cold, relentless, early-April rain is drenching the newly green landscape. Inside, however, French-born Laurent Montalieu is all smiles as he waits for the crowd attending an 'immersion' seminar in Pinot Noir to abandon their morning coffees and take their seats in the auditorium.

The first day of the third annual 'Willamette: The Pinot Noir Auction' is about to get under way, and there is no attempt to mask the event's branding ambitions. The red wines awaiting the gavel are all labeled Willamette Valley, not the broader Oregon, and they are all Pinot Noirs; no other varieties need apply. As auction chair and owner of nearby Soléna Estate winery, Montalieu has reason to be

happy. There are 78 lots of Pinot Noir up for auction, selected from a cross-section of the valley's 554 producers. Moreover, the number of registered bidders – all from the far-flung wine trade – is up by a third from 2017's level.

Montalieu is asked if he is really bold enough to believe that Willamette Valley can become – is becoming – to American Pinot Noir what Napa Valley has become

to American Cabernet Sauvignon, a thought being floated during various dinner-table conversations the evening before as guests were arriving and being entertained.

Grey-bearded, shaggy-maned and looking Puckish, Montalieu laughs at the thought, then says: "I woke up this morning with a slogan on my mind. It was PN=WV." He waits a moment while the initials are mentally translated into Pinot Noir=Willamette Valley. Then he adds: "I'm thinking about putting it on a bunch of T-shirts."

It's a fact of wine life that Napa Valley is widely regarded – and regards itself – as the Bordeaux of America, where Cabernet Sauvignon with a splash of Merlot reigns. Yet, no region has stepped forward to stake ownership as being the Burgundy of America, one that will command the most

**'We've been seeing the fruits of our labours, where we are now seen as very successful, very coveted. We've all been working very hard to brand northern Willamette' as the premier Pinot Noir region in America**

respect and demand the best prices for Pinot Noir.

Early on, Carneros got burned by trying too hard, offering up *cuvée* after *cuvée* they hoped tasted exactly like red Burgundy, *terroir* be damned. Sonoma County would seem an obvious contender, but it has muddled its Pinot image by producing many other prize-winning reds, including Cabernets and Zinfandels. So what about Santa Barbara County? But its geography is jumbled and isolated, and its winemakers seem too laid-back to be that ambitious. Even Pinot-obsessed Miles in the film *Sideways* couldn't push it to being leader of the

Pinot Pack. Still, where did this grandiose idea germinate: that zealous refugees from the vineyards of California and Beaune would have the audacity to think they could transform recently sleepy Willamette Valley into the Queen to Napa's King?

### PARALLEL TO BURGUNDY

Perhaps it was inevitable when David Lett, schooled at the University of California at Davis and indoctrinated in Burgundy, stuck the first Pinot Noir vines into Oregon soil in 1965 while on his honeymoon, in the process founding his Eyrie Vineyards in the godforsaken – as far as winegrowing at the time was concerned – Dundee Hills. Albeit an area that also lies around the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel north, the same as Burgundy.

Another thing that led to the area's success was maybe it was the arrival of the French, led by the legendary Drouhin family, who in 1987 established their own outpost in the Willamette. They were later followed by winemakers with Gallic names such as Méo, Lardière, Lafon, Liger-Belair, Henriot and Corneaux, all either buying property and existing wineries or consulting for those who had.

The potential of the area was recognised by Robert Parker, who in 1991 established Beaux Frères, his only winery, there, with his brother-in-law. Large wine corporations, sniffing the international critical attention Willamette Pinot Noirs were receiving, recently opened their checkbooks, and snapped up highly regarded properties such as Penner-Ash, Erath, Gran Moraine and Beaux-Frères itself. Meanwhile, newly made millionaires with cult winery dreams built European-style châteaux and immediately charged and got Sotheby's-worthy prices. The comparison to Napa's own path to glory was evident.

In the end there were too many sparks not to ignite a blaze of glory.

Although a few Willamette producers still enjoy planting a diversity of grapes to see what can grow well here, the majority are planting what they know grows well here – and which fetches the best prices, along with those flattering Burgundy comparisons. "Would you ask people in Napa Valley, after their success with Cabernet, why they don't plant more Grenache?" asks Eugenia Keegan of Gran Moraine, who made wine in Sonoma and Napa before migrating north.

Today, the Willamette Valley, which originates in the mountains of southern Oregon and empties into the Columbia River Valley at Portland, has 22,000 acres (about 9,000 hectares) of grapes, and 72% of them are planted to Pinot Noir – moreover, 81% of all Pinot Noir made in Oregon comes from the valley – while the next top six grapes by acreage are all white varieties.

"We've been seeing the fruits of our labours, where we are now seen as very successful, very coveted. We've all been working very hard to brand northern Willamette as the premier Pinot Noir region in America," says Lynn Penner-Ash, who headed Rex Hill Vineyards before starting Penner-Ash Wine Cellars with her husband in 1998. In 2016, the Penner-Ashes sold it to California-based Jackson Family Wines, which also owns Willamette's Gran Moraine, but she continues as winemaker.

No one is a bigger cheerleader for the Willamette Valley than the transplanted Burgundians, some of whom now make wines on both sides of the Atlantic. The evening of the same day as the Pinot immersion seminar, after the rain has

>



gone away, Montalieu and his French-born colleagues host another pre-auction dinner at his Soléna Estate, which, like most wineries in the northern valley, is located on a hillside with beautiful vistas.

**Another common tie with Burgundy is that both regions have highly variable weather with frequent rains, which, especially with Pinot, instills interesting vintage variations**

“You can feel the wine buzz in Oregon,” says Jean-Nicolas Méo, who owns Méo-Camuzet in Vosne-Romanée, as well as Nicolas-Jay winery in the Willamette, which he launched in 2012 with American music entrepreneur Jay Boberg. “Oregon

is going to be a second Burgundy,” Méo predicts, explaining the differences between the two this way: “In Burgundy, we never have to worry about acidity. In the Willamette, we never have to worry about fruit.”

Domaine Divio’s Bruno Corneaux says: “For me, the similarity between Burgundy and the Willamette Valley is the same latitude – cool nights and you never have to worry about the flavour profile. The soils are quite different, but the synergy between the soil and the vine for both is great for delicate, elegant wines. We have more clay in Burgundy, while we have more Willakenzie [marine sediment] here. We’re also finding it’s a good region for Chardonnay.”

Indeed, after a long romance with Pinot Gris as their designated white wine, there is now a push by local producers to switch to Chardonnay, the traditional Pinot companion.

Another common tie with Burgundy is that both regions have highly variable weather with frequent rains, which, especially with Pinot, instills interesting vintage variations. “We used to be defensive about vintages,” says Cristom Vineyards winemaker Steve Doerner, “but now we celebrate their diversity.”

Philippe Drouhin, who is in charge of family vineyards in Beaune and at Domaine Drouhin in Oregon, in an earlier conversation praised the freedom to grow which Willamette Valley offers compared with regulation-heavy France, calling Oregon “a bit of fresh air in the wine world”.

Another measure of the success of the French colony in Oregon, both artistically and socially, is that the French have not

tried to impose Burgundy criteria on Oregon. They and the Americans agree that it is counter-productive to try to make Burgundy in Oregon (and vice versa), instead repeating the mantra that “both places make great, but different, Pinot Noirs”, and seeming to believe it. “The French have been incredibly helpful,” Keegan says, and the French praise how welcoming the Americans have been.

Understandably, there is a mixture of feelings among those who have made wine in the Willamette for the past few decades about the transformation the region is undergoing. “It’s harder to know everyone,” Penner-Ash says. “It used to be that 30 or so of us would have lunch once a month in the backroom at Nick’s in McMinnville to talk business.” Now, she says: “What you’re seeing is a

**‘The Willamette is one of the best wine communities in the world. You have these pioneers who have been here since the beginning helping out the new people. Everyone here has opened up’**

proliferation of new brands. The marketplace and the economics have changed. There’s more competition, and you have some people [with little experience] thinking that they just show up and ask cult winery prices.” To be sure, some of these cult wineries have garnered cult ratings to go along with the pricing.

Penner-Ash is comfortable with the decision to sell her winery and remain as winemaker. “Corporations coming here are inevitable,” she says, “and that has good and bad aspects. But wine production now costs more, and it’s more



complicated to manage on our own.”

Rajat Parr, the heralded former San Francisco sommelier, is partial owner of wineries in both the Sta. Rita Hills in California (Sandhi, Domaine de la Côte) and Willamette Valley (Evening Land). Though reluctant to pick a favorite (Sta. Rita has more perfume and elegance, he says, while Willamette has darker fruit), he is outspoken in his praise of the Willamette culture. “The Willamette is one of the best wine communities in the world,” he says. “You have these pioneers who have been here since the beginning helping out the new people. Everyone here has opened up.”

But even Pinot-loving Parr is among those in the valley interested in planting other grapes, those who, in spite of the praise and financial status Pinot has engendered, resist what some see as a plant-only-Pinot steamroller.

So, what does the future hold, and what needs to be done if the Willamette is to unquestionably be considered America’s top Pinot Noir producer? Winemaking infrastructure lags behind California but is catching up. Lab tests no longer need to be sent south. Specialised equipment is easier to source. Attracting good vineyard

labour is a hassle, but so is it is everywhere else. Which clones to plant no longer seems a pressing question. California’s famous Silicon Valley Bank, a great source of financing and winery analytics, has opened a Portland office.

However, although local community colleges offer wine-training programmes, there is no Oregon training ground equivalent to UC Davis, nor is there likely to be for a few decades.

## GREAT WINES

Expansion is an iffy question. “It’s a big valley, but the production of great wines is limited to the hills – and most of that is already taken,” says Thomas Houseman of Anne Amie Vineyards. Penner-Ash, however, thinks that the more fertile valley floor is perfect for the larger production of entry-level Willamette Pinot Noirs, a concept few would have considered necessary not many years ago.

Meanwhile, back at Montalieu’s dinner, a few courses of rich food and several bottles of Oregon Pinot Noir intermixed with Bourgogne rouge have taken their toll. Méo slowly rises and, with his fellow French-American *citoyens des vignes*, leads the singing of Burgundy’s national anthem, the nonsensical *La La La* drinking song, hands waving wildly in the air.

Let the coronation continue. dbHK