

Friday, October 24, 2008

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TASTINGS | OCTOBER 24, 2008

The State of Oregon Pinot

Production Is Up and They're More Affordable. But What About Quality?

By DOROTHY J. GAITER
AND JOHN BRECHER

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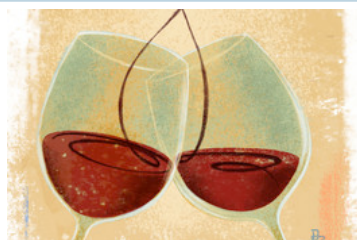
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When we were young, we used to take Amtrak trains on a circuit all the way around the U.S. and rarely leave the bed of our sleeper car for the entire trip. Our meals were even delivered there.

One leg of our trip ended in Portland, Ore., and that was always our favorite stop because of the people, the restaurants and the wine. Even 25 years ago, when we dropped into a wine store there, the merchants would talk earnestly about the state's own wines and assure us that, someday, Oregon would be a famous wine-producing region. Considering that in 1980 there were just 34 bonded wineries and 1,100 vineyard acres, it was hard to imagine, but their passion was charming.

WSJ wine-tasting columnists John Brecher and Dottie Gaiter typically split on Oregon pinot noir, but the couple has recently come together on the red wine -- and for good reason. (Oct. 23)

Today, Oregon has about 400 wineries, 17,000 acres of vineyards and a world-wide reputation for its wine, especially its Pinot Noir. Even just in the decade we have been writing this column -- and routinely tasting Oregon Pinot -- we've been fascinated with the growth, not just in size but in quality. For many years, Oregon's Pinots were the only wine about which we disagreed. Dottie loved their upfront fruitiness, but John found them too fruity and thought they were, in many cases, superficial, without the earthiness and soulful sense of place that makes great Pinot Noir -- in Burgundy, for instance -- such a special wine.



Don Kilpatrick III

The Dow Jones Oregon Pinot Noir Index

In a blind tasting of Oregon Pinot Noir under \$60, mostly from the 2006 vintage but also including some from 2005, these were our favorites. These are great with all kinds of food, from roast chicken to lamb, and would be a lovely

As the years have gone on, we have found our views becoming less divided. Three years ago, in our last broad blind tasting of Oregon Pinot, John found that the wines had indeed become more complex and interesting, while Dottie continued to enjoy their pure fruit and sense of place. At that time, though, we cautioned that many good Oregon Pinots were very hard to find and that most were pricey. Since then, there have been a few good developments: Oregon Pinots have become more widely available and more are priced at \$20 or less, at least partly as a result of a particularly abundant crop in 2006. In fact, Oregon crushed more than twice as much



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About The Authors

Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher write "Tastings," the weekly wine column of The Wall Street Journal. They also are the authors of "Wine for Every Day and Every Occasion," "Love by the Glass: Tasting Notes from a Marriage" and "The Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine." A complete revision of that book, called "The New and Improved Wall Street Journal Guide to Wine," was published in September 2002.

accompaniment to your Thanksgiving dinner. Most of these could benefit from some age. If you open one now, think about decanting it, but only after you taste it first.

Domaine Serene "Evenstad Reserve" 2005 (Willamette Valley). \$52.99.

Very Good/Delicious.

Best of tasting. Big, gutsy Pinot, with black pepper, earth and body to spare. Serious wine, made with integrity.

Foris Vineyards Winery 2006 (Rogue Valley). \$18.99.

Very Good.

Best value (tie).

Classy, with tightly wound fruit and a raspberry-spice-oak-nutmeg finish. Even a touch of chocolate. Lovely.

Yamhill Valley Vineyards "Estate" 2006 (McMinnville, Willamette Valley). \$19.95.

Very Good.

Best value (tie).

Good minerals and some sensuous funk.

Interesting, with a sense of place. As Dottie said, "It's relaxed, but it delivers" -- especially at the price.

Beaux Frères 2006 (Willamette Valley) \$54.95.

Very Good.

A complete wine, with confident Pinot fruit, a real clarity of taste and some proud earthiness.

Well-known name in Oregon Pinot and this one, for us, justifies the buzz.

Francis Tannahill "The Hermit" 2005 (Willamette Valley). \$41.99.

Very Good.

Rich, soulful nose. Great balance, nicely restrained, with fruit enveloped in earth and just enough zingy acidity. Totally winning.

King Estate Winery "Signature Collection" 2006 (Oregon). \$29.99.

Very Good.

Unusually pretty color, velvety smooth. Attractive, rich nose. All sorts of purple fruits on the taste, plus some lilac and rosemary. Crisp and clean, but with a sense of earth. As John said, "Just good wine." Longtime favorite.

Ponzi Vineyards 2006 (Willamette Valley). \$37.99.

Very Good.

Fresh and fruity, easy and pure. It simply tastes real.

Roco (Dundee Wine Co.) 2006 (Willamette Valley). \$39.99.

Very Good.

Charming, honest wine that shows the beauty of letting the ripe, somewhat grapey fruit take center stage. Easy to drink.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious!

These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California, Illinois and New York. Prices vary widely.

Pinot Noir in 2007 as in 2004. We were eager to know: How is quality holding up?

We conducted a large blind tasting to find out. We bought more than 50 off store shelves. We set a limit of \$60 -- not \$50 because there were so many between \$50 and \$60. We focused on the 2006 vintage because those are the most widely available, but we picked up some 2005 wines as well. While many of these wines were well-known old friends, from Adelsheim and Argyle to WillaKenzie, our sample also included some small-production wines, because the average Oregon winery produces fewer than 5,500 total cases. We also included names that are highly regarded, such as Domaine Drouhin and Beaux Frères, but have never been among our personal favorites.

We tasted the wine in blind flights over several nights. In honor of the tasting, we cooked a special meal each night that seemed right for the wine: duck one night, for instance, stuffed roasted chicken another, and lamb another. We tasted the wines before dinner and then retasted the best with the food.

We are delighted to report that Oregon Pinot continues its upward trajectory. The difference in the wines over the years is remarkable. We found again and again in this tasting that the wines have developed a confidence and depth that beautifully complement their lovely fruit. The wines have not only a purity of fruit but a purity of vision that is very attractive. Like Burgundy itself, these are wines that speak softly to the more romantic parts of our being.

As you know, we've been big supporters of California Pinot Noir for many years. Long before "Sideways," we argued that it was the most consistent American red wine on shelves, both above and below \$20. In our most recent tasting of California Pinot, however, we raised some warning flags. We felt that too many California Pinots were on the verge of becoming heavy and too obviously "made," as though, in a post-"Sideways" world, the winemaker wanted to be sure he or she was the star instead of the fruit itself. Too many of the Pinots, as a result, seemed ponderous, possibly

over-oaked and maybe even a little sweet -- all in all, not the elegant and haunting Pinots we want and expect.

Oregon's offerings have so far avoided this trap. In our tasting, the fruit was allowed, again and again, to speak for itself. Sure, we used descriptive words like raspberries, tobacco, earth, chocolate and even funk (which is a good thing, in limited amounts, in Pinot). But the more important words we used over and over were integrity, honest, true. The winemakers allowed the vineyards themselves, the fruit itself, the terroir itself, to star. This is what makes great Pinot what it is -- an expression of place. When we tasted these wines, we imagined the vintners standing among the vines crushing a grape between their fingers, smiling broadly and deciding that the best thing they could do is not screw it up. This made the wines, on the whole, both tasty and relaxed, as though no one was trying too hard (though we know, of course, what really goes into this).

Oh Waiter...

All of this reminded us of Oregon Pinot Noir pioneer David Lett, the owner and winemaker

Ms. Gaiter and Mr. Brecher have been married since 1979. Ms. Gaiter was a national reporter and editor covering issues of race for the Journal from 1990 to 2000. Mr. Brecher was Page One Editor of the Journal from 1992 to 2000. They began writing "Tastings" in 1998 and became full-time wine columnists in 2002.

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More and more waiters are quite **knowledgeable about wine** and many restaurants today are training them in **wine tasting and appreciation**. Read **Wine Notes**.

of Eyrie Vineyards, who died two weeks ago. Mr. Lett began making Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley in 1970 and he well understood the requirements of Pinot Noir

grapes. "The most important thing is to get them harvested at the right time, then keep your mitts off them, because human intervention often messes it up," he told us in 2004.

The index will tell you what our favorites tasted like and about how much they cost. We're delighted that two of our favorites in this tasting cost about \$20, though our best of tasting, Domaine Serene, cost more than \$50. The winery says it made 7,500 cases of the 2005 that were distributed nationwide. The 2006 will be released next year.

We'd urge you, as always, not to obsess about individual labels, because the wines from 2006, especially, are consistently winning. In fact, in many cases we'd offer these our highest compliment for Pinot: They're sexy.

■ Our email address is wine@wsj.com. Because of the volume of mail we receive, we are not able to respond personally to everyone, but in our Wine Notes column that often appears Friday or Saturday, we answer some questions that are commonly posed to us.

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