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Letting the creative juices flow

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle
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GARY FOUNTAIN

Rollin Soles' Argyle Winery in Oregon's Willamette Valley has delivered more Wine Spectator Top 100 wines than any other producer in the state since its founding.

Picture the scene: It's the mid-1970s and four buddies are hanging out on the front porch of a small one-story rented house in College Station not far from the Texas A&M campus, where they're students. They come from different walks of life and aspire to very different futures, but the details are secondary.

Dreams are dreams.

Rollin Soles had come down from the Fort Worth area to study microbiology, although he admits he had no clue where that was going to lead him. The other three chaps had official majors, too, but if you'd dropped in most nights, you'd have thought they were pursuing advanced degrees in pickin' and grinnin'. Soles' mates were the now-famous singers Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen, and Bryan Duckworth, arguably Texas' finest fiddle maker.

"That was our whole social center," Soles said. "You know how front porches are. People just wander by and stop in. I can still remember Lyle coming over real excited and telling us, 'This is a song I just wrote. What do you think?'" The scene was just awesome. We'd play a little bluegrass — even me, but badly — some dominoes, or just sit out there and talk."

Soles went in a very different direction from the others on the front porch. He harmonizes in a bottle instead. His Argyle Winery in Dundee, in Oregon's lovely Willamette Valley, has delivered more Wine Spectator Top 100 wines than any other producer in the state since its founding 23 years ago.

Although he got his microbiology degree from A&M, a summer trip he took to Switzerland after his junior year proved to be the most meaningful experience of his college days. A biochemistry professor arranged for Soles to work with his wife's cousin, Hans Kesselring, a highly respected Swiss winemaker.

"For me, it was like, 'Wow, I can get a job,' and I'd heard Switzerland was a pretty nice place," Soles said, laughing. "But, after spending that summer working in the vineyards with the snow-capped Alps in every direction it became very crystal clear to me what I wanted to do."

Upon returning to the U.S. he applied for the graduate oenology program at University of California-Davis and was one of five "foreign" students to be accepted. He wound up rooming with a fellow from Oregon, who, tiring of Soles' interminable bragging about all things Texan, took him home for a weekend visit. Home was the Willamette Valley, then beginning to flower as a serious viticulture area.

"It was love at first sight," Soles said. "As soon as I saw the place, I knew in my heart of hearts that's where it was going to happen for me."

But, he added, "having an aversion to instant gratification, I decided to try to work in a few other great places first."

The initial stop on his seven-year odyssey was South Australia, where he met the people who became his initial investors in Argyle. (They had ties both to the Petaluma Winery, where he did his internship, and to a gigantic diamond mine called Argyle. Also, Dundee's original settlers hailed from Scotland's Argyll countryside.) Soles then passed through Napa Valley, where he worked with Bo Barrett at Chateau Montelena, and finished at Kesselring's winery, Schlossgut Bachtobel, where he was an apprentice winemaker.

"Every place I went," Soles said, "I was always asking myself, 'Can I apply what I'm learning here to what I want to do in Willamette?'"

He could. Soles' first chardonnay from the inaugural 1987 vintage made the Spectator's Top 100. Ten other Argyle wines have since been thusly honored, almost equally spread among chardonnays, pinot noirs and his excellent sparkler, the Argyle Brut. No other



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EVENT OF THE WEEK

- What:** 2010 Winefest: France vs. the USA
- Where:** Brenner's on the Bayou, 1 Birdsall
- When:** 1-4 p.m. Saturday
- Info:** Wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhone Valley, the Alsace and the Loire Valley can be tasted side by side with comparable American offerings in restaurant's lovely outdoor setting. BV's Tapestry and Sterling Vineyards' SVR Meritage, for example, will be paired with Château Lacoste Borie and Château Lalande Borie. Some 20 wines are to be featured.
- Cost:** \$65 in advance, \$75 at the door
- Reservations:** 713-868-4444

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winery anywhere has landed on the list in all three categories.

The Argyle wines, retail-priced from the low \$30s to about \$70 locally, come from four distinct vineyards — one of them fittingly called Lone Star, because it was adjacent to a Lone Star Road — that are cultivated using only the strictest of sustainable practices. Soles' first hire back in '87, Allen Holstein, remains his vineyard manager, and Soles said, "I couldn't do it without good grapes."

Since 2003, Soles has also made Roco chardonnays and pinots in a labor-of-love collaboration with his wife, Corby, from a tiny plot called Wits' End.

"I'm the scientist; she's the artist," he said. "The Roco project has been a real joy."

The 54-year-old Soles, who visited Houston recently for the first time in a long while, admits he often reflects on those halcyon days in Aggieland, feeling the need, when he does so, "to pinch myself" about how things turned out for each of the friends.

"The coolest thing about it," he said, "is that the four of us, whether we knew or didn't know what we wanted back then, all ended up doing something that's fun, interesting and really, really creative. And we all feel blessed that what we do is interesting to other folks."

A bit of an understatement that.

Argyle wines in Houston

- **Retail:** Central Market, H-E-B (Platinum stores), Houston Wine Merchant, Spec's.
- **Restaurants:** Benjy's, Catalan, Eddie V's, Plonk's Bistro, Reef, SoVino, Strip House.

Roco wines in Houston

- **Retail:** Houston Wine Merchant.
- **Restaurants:** Fuad's, Prego, SoVino.

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