



Wine Club Tasting Notes

September 2007

A Little History of Oregon's Wine Industry

This month we're excited to bring you two selections which represent the wines Oregon is best known for producing – Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris. While California is the 'brute' of the wine growing world in the US, just consider Oregon much like the little-engine-that-could – the winemakers here have chugged along, all the while gaining steam and momentum, as their wines are quickly gaining in popularity and are known for uncompromised quality. Here's how it all began...

Wine production began in Oregon in the late 19th century. Portland was a rough-and-tumble port city, complete with plenty of dangerous characters and, of course, prostitutes. With this type of 'culture,' it's not long before grapes are grown to make into wine to feed to the hard-working men and the working girls. (Oregon's growth in the wine industry during this time mirrors California's wine industry, which boomed during the gold rush.) Then along came Prohibition. By 1938, however, wine was being produced again, but the industry just plodded along with no major developments being made until 1961, when Hillcrest Vineyard was established by a graduate from the University of California at Davis. This winemaker had been firmly advised that vinifera grapes, such as Pinot Noir, could not be grown in Oregon! Within five years of this sage advice, which no one heeded (thank goodness), four other wineries were experimenting with Pinot Noir and were pleased enough with the initial results to continue. David Lett of Eyrie vineyards was finally able to put the foolish notion to bed that Oregon couldn't grow Pinot Noir when his wine was put under the spotlight with an eye-catching performance in a French-sponsored 1979 tasting comparing top French wines with New World emulators – his 1975 Eyrie Vineyards Pinot came in second.

When Eyrie put Dundee Hills (located within the Willamette Valley) on the map as a potentially great Pinot Noir growing region, it was certainly not lost on the French. Beaune, Burgundy, merchant Robert Drouhin endorsed the region by purchasing land and building a state-of-the-art winery within a stone's throw of Lett's own vineyards in the Dundee Hills. By the late 1990s, there were more than 100 operating wineries, and while that number has increased over the last few years, it hasn't had the BOOM California has experienced. This is for a couple of reasons. One reason is that the winegrowers and winemakers seemingly take the time (which invariably involves more money) to put a lot more care in their vineyards – there are more organic and/or biodynamic vineyards in Oregon in comparison to California. Another reason is that the economics of the scale necessary for the production of cheap wine are not a feature of the Oregonian wine

industry. In other words, you won't find a winery producing White Zin to help fund the cost of barrels, equipment, etc., and this reason, along with the time and care put into the vineyards mentioned earlier, is why the wines from Oregon tend to cost a bit more. The overall bottom line is that the wines speak for themselves in terms of quality. So let's learn a little about the wines in your bag this month...