

# WINE OVERVIEW



## OREGON

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

If I were a bunch of Pinot Noir grapes, and I couldn't speak French, then I would want to live in the Dundee Hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley. It is widely agreed that outside of the Grand Cru vineyards of France's Burgundy region that Oregon is probably the best place on earth to cultivate the finicky Pinot Noir grape. Let's find out why.

### CLIMATE

Oregon's overall climate can best be described as mild. While it is famous for wet, gray winters, during the summer growing season it is usually sunny and dry. And, most importantly, it is not too hot. This is critical for growing Pinot Noir, which is a relatively thin-skinned grape and cannot thrive in a hot zone. This provides a significant contrast to California where, for too long, Pinot Noir was often planted in micro climates that were way too warm causing the resulting wines to have a stewed tomato flavor, like drinking ketchup. (Yum). The general physics of this are simple: when wine grapes mature too quickly in a hot climate the fructose rises while the acids drop out producing wines that are flabby, soft, unbalanced and often a little too sweet. Typical examples of this are California Chardonnays that taste like pineapple juice or Australian Shiraz that drinks like blackberry syrup. Oregon almost never has this problem.

### TYPOGRAPHY

The favorable climate in Oregon is influenced by two main features: the Pacific Ocean on the Western border and the Cascade Mountain Range in the middle of the state. Most of the important vineyards lie between them. Large bodies of water like oceans, or Lake Michigan for that matter, take a long time to heat up or cool down providing a tempering influence that prevents extreme spikes or drops in temperature. The mountains act as a natural buffer against severe weather systems absorbing the brunt of the precipitation from storms.

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### WINE GROWING REGIONS

There are three major wine producing regions, or AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) in Oregon. They are the Willamette Valley, starting at Portland and running 150 miles south, Columbia Gorge which is 60 miles East of Portland, and Southern Oregon which contains two sub AVAs, the Rogue Valley and Umpqua Valley. Willamette Valley produces Oregon's most acclaimed Pinot Noirs. Southern Oregon, which is slightly warmer, produces mostly Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris. Columbia Gorge, which is partly in Washington and partly in Oregon, is where you are likely to find a much wider variety of wines produced from Syrah, Cabernet, Merlot, Chardonnay and Riesling.

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## GRAPE VARIETIES

As of the 2010 vintage, Oregon has 19,400 acres of vineyards, which pales in comparison to its Southern neighbor. California has an estimated 535,000 acres under vine, over 25 times that of Oregon! It's no wonder that the best Oregon wines can sometimes be hard to find and are often a little pricey. Of the 19,400 acres, almost 60% is planted to Pinot Noir (11,523). Pinot Noir holds a special place in the hearts of all true wine lovers for its unique ability to display power and grace at the same time. It can show rich and complex flavors while resting on a very delicate framework. Sometimes a place becomes associated with a particular grape variety that it produces exceptionally well. When we say New Zealand we think of Sauvignon Blanc. When we say Argentina we think of Malbec. And Napa Valley, Cabernet. This is just the case with Oregon and Pinot Noir.

The second most widely planted grape in Oregon is the grayish mutation of Pinot Noir known as Pinot Gris. The quantity is still rather small at only 2,829 acres. Pinot Gris usually produces soft, gently perfumed wines of more substance and color than most whites. Both Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir produce wines that are an excellent match for one of the most famous foods of the region, Pacific NW salmon. In fact, Pinot Noir and salmon has become the classic red wine with fish pairing.

There are 70 other varietals planted in Oregon but none have had an economic impact on the Oregon wine industry as they are all well below 1,000 total acres planted.



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## HISTORY

Although wine has been produced in Oregon since the mid 1800's, the modern era didn't really begin until the 1960's. And it wasn't until 1979 that Oregon wine received any international recognition. That year, David Lett of Eyrie vineyards submitted his now legendary 1975 South Block Pinot Noir to the French Wine Olympics and took top prize beating all the best competition from Burgundy. It is remarkable that in such a short time the quality of Oregon wine has risen to a level that competes with what France has been doing for literally hundreds of years. (The first written mention of Pinot Noir in France dates back to 1375!)

Along with Lett, other important pioneers in Oregon wine were Richard Sommer, Charles Coury, and Dick Erath. Sommer established Hillcrest Vineyards after attending UC Davis where he was told that vitus vinifera could not be grown in Oregon. Coury started planting vines in Forest Grove in the Northern part of the Willamette, and Erath established the famous Knudsen-Erath winery. All these men started out working in California and they all came to the same conclusion, that Oregon was a much better place to make the more elegant style of wine that they preferred. They figured it out in France too. Robert Drouhin, after losing to Eyrie in the Wine Olympics, bought property right near Eyrie in Dundee and established the exceptional Domaine Drouhin.

## **TODAY'S IMPORTANT PRODUCERS**

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Some reliable names to look for when buying Oregon wine would include, but are not limited to, Adelsheim, Archery Summit, Argyle, Beaux Freres, Bethel Heights, Chehalem, Cristom, De Ponte, Domaine Drouhin, Domaine Serene, Duck Pond, Elk Cove, Eola Hills, Erath, Eyrie, Fiddlehead, Foris, Hillcrest, Ken Wright, King Estate, Mekinzie Ridge, Montinore, Oak Knoll, Panther Creek, Patricia Green, Ponzi, Salem Hills, Sokol Blosser, St. Innocent, and Torii Mor.

## **FROM THE WRITER, SOME FUN & INTERESTING TRAVEL TIPS**

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Here are a few fun things I did on a recent visit that I think anyone would enjoy. Visit King Estate, about 20 minutes west of Eugene in the tiny little town of Lorane (population about 40). This gorgeous property is well equipped to receive visitors with its terrific tasting room attached to its world class restaurant. Their wine list includes lots of their old vintages, which are always a joy to taste. If you've ever wondered if Oregon Pinot ages well, let me assure you, it does. A visit to Ken Wright Cellars in Carlton is a delicious education in understanding site-specific terroir. Carlton is a sleepy little town in the heart of the Willamette- Pinot heaven! They have two stop lights and 23 tasting rooms, a ratio that seems about right to me. My kind of town! Save the Dundee Hills for last. You can visit the majestic Domaine Serene and the iconic Domaine Drouhin in the same morning or afternoon as they are right next door to each other. After warming up at the wineries, head to the Dundee Bistro for a great meal. It is owned by the Ponzi family and there is a Ponzi tasting room conveniently located next door. Here you can have everything from pizza to foie gras without feeling like you have to be dressed up. The menu proclaims that this is home to winemakers and their friends since 1999 and it certainly is the most wine-centric restaurant I have ever seen. They have a wall lined with large format signed bottles from Dick Ponzi, Ken Wright and many, many, others that seems to say, "Yes, you will be drinking lots more wine today." At least that's what it said to me! -John Griffin