

# Seeking Complements

Oregon is ready to market more than pinot noir



Gary Werner is a Seattle-based wine industry journalist and communications consultant, and the former communications director for the Washington Wine Commission.

It all sounds very familiar: "Oregon was pretty much the first New World region to embrace this variety," said Rollin Soles, founder and winemaker at Argyle Winery in Dundee. "Back in the late '70s and early '80s, our producers hit the road and worked hard to get the marketplace to recognize us for it."

Adam Campbell, owner and winemaker at Elk Cove Vineyards in Gaston, added, "There was a lot going for it from the start: We all planted the right clones; the Oregon style focuses on fresh fruit flavors; and the bright natural acidity we get makes it great with food. It's been a real success story."

Hard numbers back up those comments. According to the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service (OASS), planted acreage for the grape has nearly doubled (+188%) during the past decade, and better viticulture means harvest tonnage has nearly tripled (+292%). Meanwhile, the average price per ton has held steady even through the economic downturn, and it wasn't long ago that growers tied sales to purchasing a given amount of another variety.

Again, it all sounds very familiar. But nothing you have read here is about pinot noir. The success story recounted above is that of pinot gris. It may not pose a challenge to the supremacy of pinot noir in Oregon, but the recent trajectory of pinot

gris, as well as renewed efforts by the industry with at least one other white variety, indicates that the region is ready for a broader profile.

## THE OTHER PINOT

"Pinot noir, pinot noir, pinot noir," said Greg Lint, president of Oak Knoll Winery in Hillsboro. "That's all I really hear in the marketplace. But to increase the power of the Oregon wine brand, we need to promote more than one varietal." This very idea inspired Lint to host the first Oregon Pinot Gris Symposium in June. The industry-only event assembled about two dozen producers to discuss the past, present and future of the state's No. 2 variety.

Winery consultant Eugenia

**Oregon pinot gris currently plays second fiddle to pinot noir in the marketplace, but Oak Knoll Winery president Greg Lint is trying to change that.**



Keegan was one of the speakers, and she echoed Lint's call for more promotion. "Across the country, there is no category called Oregon pinot gris," she said. "So these wines go onto shelves labeled 'Other Whites,' and that's an obscure corner of the store where few buyers go."

Keegan then attributed this placement, or lack of placement, to producer attitudes. "They walk into

a distributor with their pinot noir because it's what they are most proud of making. Then, at the end of their presentation, they say, 'Oh yeah, we make a pinot gris, too.' It's clear that they don't put much focus on it, but they need a white, and it offers cash flow, and so on. You have to realize that the producer sets the stage from the very beginning. Consequently, Oregon pinot gris will generate real interest only when wineries give it more respect."

Her assessment seems surprising, given the remarkable growth of pinot gris in recent years. But several winery principals agree that the variety is anything but pampered by this industry. "How many of us plant gris on 'leftover' land?" asked Robert Brittan, owner and winemaker at Brittan Vineyards in McMinnville. "So how are we going to make great wine, if we're

## SHORT COURSE

- Oregon pinot gris has grown rapidly during recent years, despite little investment in viticulture or marketing compared to pinot noir.
- Producers attribute success to consistency, relatively little competition and sub-\$20 retail prices.
- Oregon chardonnay suffered from early cultivation of inappropriate clones, but improved plant material has replaced most of the old stock.
- A devoted group believes Oregon can carve a niche with chardonnay.

not going to give it a chance on decent soils?"

Alex Sokol Blosser, co-president at Sokol Blosser Winery in Dundee, agreed: "Our pinot gris from volcanic soils is consistently better than gris grown in flood soils. There's much more complexity." He then added: "But there's a price issue. You're paying \$40,000 to \$60,000 per acre for volcanic sites, whereas flood sites go for half that amount. So most people are going to plant pinot noir on those more expensive soils, since the ROI (return on investment) per ton is about double that for gris."

Jeff Kandarian, director of wine-making at King Estate in Eugene, said those economics often flow upward from the ground. "When it comes to pinot noir, many growers will be out there with crews leafing, dropping cluster shoulders and cleaning it all up three different times," he said. "But many of

the same people just won't do that when it comes to pinot gris. Getting them to green-thin even just one time at veraison can be like twisting someone's arm."

According to Dave Paige, winemaker at Adelsheim Vineyard in Newberg, the inputs simply reflect the price of the final wine. "Pinot gris is pretty well fixed as a \$15



Sokol Blosser Winery in Dundee, Ore., has found that pinot gris grows best in volcanic soils.

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to \$20 retail wine, and I don't see that money changing," he said. "For example, I don't think people will suddenly decide that it's a \$30 wine. So we just have to manage our work with gris to compete at that level."

### POINTS FOR STYLE

Having something to retail under \$20 is important in the post-2008, recessionary world. But price-points alone don't explain why pinot gris has taken off so significantly in Oregon – especially when it seems to endure second-class treatment and no real promotional effort. Why not go with another variety?

"Pinot gris is an extension of our work with pinot noir," said Elk Cove's Campbell. "They're related, so as we've elevated our understanding of pinot noir and the quality of our efforts with it, we've carried those benefits over to pinot gris. Also, there is a consistency of style. I'm sure that more than 90% of Oregon pinot gris is clone 146 or 152, stainless-steel fermented and with little or no malolactic."

Jesse Lange, general manager at Lange Estate in Dundee, agreed, adding that there's a qualitative component to this stylistic consistency. "Pinot gris grows really well in Oregon, so we get great texture and richness in the wine," he said. "By contrast, most (pinot) grigio has no mouthfeel at all. And people respond to that difference, so it's something we can exploit."

Added Lange: "Oregon pioneered pinot gris in America, and very few other regions claim it or even try to claim it. So it's just easier to make an impact. Of course, 'easier' does not mean 'easy.' We still have a lot to do on the marketing front."

### WHITHER CHARDONNAY?

In contrast to the rise of pinot gris, Oregon chardonnay appears to have collapsed. According to the OASS, planted acreage has fallen by almost 30% in the past decade, and harvest tonnage has dropped by 40%. This seems an unlikely

trend for a region that proudly claims kinship with Burgundy.

"When I came here 15 or 16 years ago," said Eric Hamacher, owner and winemaker at Hamacher Wines in Carlton, "I thought it was odd when people claimed we couldn't make very good char-

donnay in Oregon. I've seen way too much very good chard grown right next to very good pinot noir. I mean, the global benchmarks for both have been only meters apart for a thousand years."

The reason for local pessimism seemed rooted in the origins of

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Oregon chardonnay. "The industry here brought a clone up from California that was ill-suited to this region," said Hamacher. "It was the 108 from UC Davis, and it was designed to maximize production and maintain acidity in a much warmer climate. That's almost the opposite of what is needed here, so the early wines were generally searing and lacked flavor."



**With its Ian's Reserve and INOX wines, Chehalem is setting out to prove that Oregon can make great chardonnay.**

A solution appeared during the mid-1990s, when Dijon clones were made available from France, but they showed up too late for many producers. Elk Cove was established with fully half of its production devoted to chardonnay, yet 1998 marked its final vintage of the

variety. Sokol Blosser was once the largest producer of chardonnay in Oregon; it pulled it all out by 1999.

"For pinot noir, Burgundy is the model," said Campbell, "and Oregon produces something to fit that niche. But for chardonnay, the model is not white Burgundy – at least for the American consumer. It's probably Sonoma or elsewhere in California, and that's not our niche."

Sokol Blosser added: "You have to decide where to hang your hat. If it's on high-end chardonnay, you're going up against some amazing production from California and, really, everywhere. High-end pinot gris, though, is a completely different story."

### CHARD'S SECOND CHANCE

However, Harry Peterson-Nedry, founder and winemaker at Chehalem in Newberg, said the overall statistics mask what's really happening with chardonnay in Oregon. "There was a pretty remarkable pullout of the old 108 clone," he said. "We had lots of acres taken out of production, but they have been replanted with the new Dijon material. Yes, there's still a reduction from 10 years ago, but you'll actually see increases in 2005, '06, '07 and '08. Then the economy put the brakes on any new planting."

Peterson-Nedry said the industry also needed to learn how to work with this new plant material, and that likely put a short-term damper on chardonnay production. "Several of us formed a group called ORCA for Oregon Chardonnay Alliance," he said. "We spent about six years tasting and comparing notes on yeast selection, stainless steel fermentation, barrel usage and more. That gave us all the guts to experiment and the guidance to find Oregon's style – which is now about white fruit and white blossom characters, with lower alcohols and bright acidity."

The group later dedicated three or four years to promoting this new iteration of Oregon chardonnay, but then things went quiet. According to Hamacher, "People were

impressed by what they tasted. But then it was, OK, we're kind of done." That inactivity lasted a year or so. Then, this June, the desire to keep raising the bar and awareness for Oregon chardonnay resurfaced in a larger form.

"We assembled for a tasting at Chehalem," said Hamacher, "and there were about 30 of us. It was pretty exciting. We've decided to get together on a regular basis with the goal of constantly improving our work with this variety. We want to make everyone's wine better. So I wouldn't be surprised if you start to hear more talk about Oregon chardonnay again."

Add this to the success of pinot gris, and it's clear that the Oregon wine industry is branching out. ■

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