



## Oregon Pinot Noir Update

Josh Raynolds | Jul/Aug 2013

The 2011 harvest was the latest ever recorded in the Willamette Valley for most growers, in many cases extending into the first week of November. In theory, grapes picked well into the fall can achieve true ripeness, fleshiness and dramatic complexity. But for that to happen the vines must enjoy at least a reasonably normal growing season before getting to that point, and in 2011 this simply was not the case.

Two thousand eleven got off to an auspicious start with a large crop set, but then things went south quickly. The weather stayed cool to cold through the summer and sugar levels crept upward at a frighteningly slow pace. Experienced growers here learned long ago not to panic over projections for rain in September but this year no one had any choice but to sit and wait for their fruit to ripen. The weather finally turned clear and warm in early October, which kick-started the fruit, and harvesting began in most cases around the 15th. Happily, conditions were glorious for the next three weeks.

While the IWC is loath to jump on the vintage-chart bandwagon, I can't recall another growing season that was described as "the most stressful ever" by every single grower and producer with whom I've talked or traded e-mail.

So I won't fault anybody for generalizing that 2011 was a sub-par year, perhaps the weakest overall in the last decade. But as with all things wine, it just isn't that simple. Many of the 2011s I tried are lovely, precise, low-octane wines that will appeal to wine lovers who are turned off by what some call the grenache style of pinot noir: inky color, high alcohol, dark fruit character and general heaviness. Of course, there are an awful lot of tart--even screechy--wines out there so smart consumers will tread carefully through this vintage. But as was the case in 2005 and 2007, 2011 will provide plenty of extremely pleasant surprises.

The problem with vintage charts is that they simply cannot convey the complexities of a great or difficult growing season or harvest and also take into account the triumphs and failures experienced by individual producers. They also can't adequately address the complexity and sheer expanse of a region like the Willamette Valley: just because things were dodgy up in the Dundee Hills, were conditions exactly the same down in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA? Even more complicated and impossible to convey with a handy vintage chart is the fact that it's perfectly possible for a grower or winemaker to botch things up after a great season while his neighbors knock it out of the park. The converse is also true: a producer can nail it after a difficult growing season. That's pretty uncommon but it happens, and it happened in 2011 in the Willamette Valley. Great producers, like great vineyards, distinguish themselves by their ability consistently to produce good, even great, wines under arduous vintage situations, and 2011 was just the year to prove or disprove this theory.

Most wineries' high-end 2010s have been released since last year's report and the best wines are among the finest I've tasted from the Willamette Valley in over a decade. This was another cool year but the wines, in general, have more sweetness and power than all but the cream of the 2011 crop. I've also had the chance to revisit quite a few 2009s over the last 12 months, and these wines continue to stand in sharp contrast to the '10s, and, naturally, the '11s. Broader, deeper and more masculine, most 2009s will be prized by fans of brawny, deeply fruity pinots, but there's plenty of elegance to the top wines as well.



## DOBBES FAMILY ESTATE

### **91pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Quailhurst Vineyard Chehalem Mountains**

(\$65) Bright ruby-red. Sexy, oak-spiced aromas of black raspberry and cherry, with a smoky overtone and a touch of musky herbs. Pliant, appealingly sweet red and dark berry flavors are lifted by peppery spices and show very good energy. Closes smooth and long, with lingering vanilla and spicecake notes and silky tannins.

### **90pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Amelia Rose Cuvee Rogue Valley**

(\$45) Deep red. Smoky cherry and black raspberry aromas are lifted by notes of white pepper and fresh rose. Juicy, focused and appealingly sweet, offering fresh red and dark berry flavors and a hint of candied orange peel. Closes on a refreshingly bitter note, with very good focus and vivacity, and silky, harmonious tannins.

### **90pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Symonette Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills**

(\$65) Ruby-red. Cherry, Moroccan spices and fresh flowers on the perfumed nose. Sweet and sappy on the palate, offering an array of red and dark fruit qualities firmed by a bitter cherry pit nuance. Shows very good power and focus on the finish, which features firm but fine-grained tannins and suave, perfumed persistence.

### **89pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Patricia's Cuvee Willamette Valley**

(\$55) Bright ruby. Oak-spice- and floral-accented aromas of dark berries and licorice show very good energy and focus. Juicy, penetrating black raspberry and bitter cherry flavors become sweeter with air and are braced by tangy acidity. A hint of tart berry skin adds grip and cut to the clinging finish.

### **89pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Griffin's Cuvee Willamette Valley**

(\$45) Bright ruby-red. High-pitched, vaguely jammy red berries and subtle oak spice on the nose. Plump strawberry and black raspberry flavors are lifted and braced by tangy acidity, which lends a mouthwatering quality. Lively and emphatically fruity pinot, finishing with good balance, juicy acidity and very soft tannins.

### **89pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Meyer Vineyard Dundee Hills**

(\$65) Bright ruby-red. Ripe cherry and black raspberry aromas are complemented by notes of cola, allspice and woodsmoke. Smooth and expansive on the palate, offering sweet red and dark berry preserve flavors and a hint of bitter chocolate. Closes on a tangy note, with good focus, lift and lingering spiciness.

### **88pts 2011 Dobbes Family Estate Pinot Noir Grande Assemblage Cuvee Willamette Valley**

(\$28) Bright red. Assertive aromas of red and dark berry preserves and cola, with a spicy quality gaining strength with air. Fresh, juicy raspberry and blackberry flavors gain sweetness with aeration and pick up a note of white pepper. A bit jammy but offers a lot of sweet fruit and finishes with good lift, clarity and soft tannins.

## WINE BY JOE

### **87pts 2011 Wine by Joe Pinot Noir Oregon**

(\$19) Bright red. Aromas of cherry and blackberry are lifted by a note of cracked pepper. On the rigid side, offering zesty dark berry and bitter cherry flavors with a slightly tart edge. Closes with soft tannins and decent length, leaving a tangy cherry pit note behind.