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The French Keep Coming

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by Harvey Steiman

Big-name Burgundians have arrived in Willamette Valley

It was a moment of validation for Oregon wine in 1987 when Robert Drouhin, patriarch of the Beaune-based négociant firm, bought land for a vineyard in Willamette Valley. Over the years Domaine Drouhin Oregon's wines, made by his daughter Véronique Drouhin-Boss, earned a reputation for finesse and consistency.

Dominique Lafon of Domaines des Comtes Lafon in Meursault has been a hands-on consultant since its inception in 2007 with Evening Land, mapping out the geology of the home Seven Springs Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills and setting a style that has put it on the top tier of Oregon wineries.

French vintners are becoming more present. I checked on their efforts on a recent week in Willamette Valley.

Furthest along the recent wave, Louis-Michel Liger-Belair joined the party with in 2012. Liger-Belair, who makes La Romanée in Vosne-Romanée, consults with co-owners Mark Tarlov (a co-founder of Evening Land) and Australia-born U.S. importer Gavin Speight in Chapter 24 and Maison l'Envoyé. Mike D. Etzel (son of Beaux Frères' Mike Etzel) is the onsite winemaker, and he's having a blast experimenting with concrete eggs, custom-trimming grape bunches and employing techniques to reduce alcohol naturally in the wines without sacrificing ripe flavors that often come from extrasweet grapes.

When he was Liger-Belair's winemaker, Henri Jayet developed a process to deal with the heat in the 2003 vintage. The secret involves a sequence of techniques used in combination "to persuade the yeast to make glycerin rather than alcohol," said Tarlov. Frequent pump-overs and punch-downs in open-top fermentors also help the alcohol dissipate.

I tasted through the 2012s and 2013s at the winery on the Maysara property, and found plenty of opulence with a sense of spaciousness and transparency in the texture that reflected alcohol levels of 12.6 to 13 percent. The 2012s in release are scoring in the low- to mid-90s. Clearly, this bunch is on to something.

Jadot, the Beaune négociant, bought Resonance Vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton last year, and Jacques Lardière, Jadot's recently retired winemaker, made about 3,000 cases from it in 2013. It'll be ready to bottle in December. Tasting



from barrel at Trisaetum, his temporary cellar, I found consistently bright raspberry, cherry and cinnamon flavors and a refreshing transparency in the various lots representing different clones and sections of the vineyard.

Jean-Nicolas Méo of Méo-Camuzet in Nuits-St.-Georges was tracking the harvest from his home in Nuits-St.-Georges as his partner Jay Boberg and newly hired winemaker Adam Smith (who also has his own Oregon winery, Eisold-Smith) tended fermentations in a corner of the Adelsheim winery.

Finally, Isabelle Meunier, the Canada-born and Dijon-trained winemaker who handled all the Evening Land wines onsite through 2013, had six fermentations going in her temporary digs at the Carlton Winemakers Studio for her own winery. More about her in a later blog, but suffice it to say I have never in my seven years of visiting her in Oregon seen her look so happy.

