

Wine Spectator

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A Place in the Sun

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by Harvey Steiman

Oregon succeeds in 2012 with ripe, elegant Pinots



There's something for everyone among the wines arriving from Oregon through the coming year, with several vintages in play, but the unalloyed star is 2012. The top Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay bottlings—the wines Oregon does best—are stunning in 2012, with many large-volume, moderately priced options overdelivering on quality. It's one of those vintages where virtually any bottle on the shelf should be worth drinking.

The 2012s combine ripe flavors with Oregon's natural penchant for transparency and elegance, exactly what happens in a typically cool climate when Mother Nature lavishes sun and warmth on a smaller-than-usual crop. The vintage stands as one of the best the state has ever produced.

Since my previous report ("Oregon's Light Touch," Jan. 31 - Feb. 28, 2014), I have reviewed nearly 675 wines from Oregon, with a record total of 16 wines earning classic scores of 95 points or higher on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale. This number is even more impressive when you consider that the 16 bottlings hail from 10 different wineries, showcasing both the quality of the vintage and the growing number of top producers.

At the pinnacle this year is Evening Land, which made four of the classic bottlings, including the Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Seven Springs Vineyard La Source 2012 (98 points, \$70), a silky red that layers gorgeous flavors on a lithe frame. This La Source is not only the report's top-scorer but also Oregon's highest-rated wine ever. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)



A number of other producers that are no strangers to the top tier are just steps behind. Beaux Frères comes the closest with its Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge The Upper Terrace 2012 (97, \$100), offering a glow of cherry, raspberry, sassafras and cinnamon flavors, followed by bottlings from Alexana, Bergström, Bethel Heights, Brick House, Soter and Stoller.

There's also a newcomer to these exalted heights this year, with Big Table Farm delivering two 95-pointers. The vibrant Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (95, \$40) weaves notes of mint through raspberry and spice flavors, while the tangy Chardonnay Willamette Valley 2012 (95, \$42) balances pear, pineapple, cream and floral flavors on a pinpoint of acidity.

"The hype is justified," says Josh Bergström about the 2012 vintage. "What makes it special is that we had no heat waves as we did in 2003 or 2009, no pruning or raisining or high sugar levels. The wines are just opulent."

"In 2012, we could see the true potential of every piece of the vineyard," says Beaux Frères proprietor Mike Etzel. "It was so clear." That's another way of saying the best wines express their terroir.

Bergström and Beaux Frères both started out aiming for richness and density, yet have consciously tried for more delicacy in recent years. Still, their 2012s have them smiling. The wines offer winning opulence without excess weight.

Those who prefer less richness can look to surrounding vintages, when rain at harvest influenced both 2011 and 2013. Although results are all over the map, a few magnificent, delicate Pinot Noirs were made in both years, which yielded excellent whites as well.

In 2011, for example, Domaine Serene bottled such beauties as the Chardonnay Dundee Hills Récolte Grand Cru (94, \$125), a new estate cuvée vibrant with acidity and distinctive for its star fruit and quince flavor profile. In 2013, several Trisaetum Rieslings soared past the 90-point mark, including its Yamhill-Carlton District Coast Range Estate Dry 2013 (92, \$24), with lime and lemon overtones to pear and citrus leaf flavors. The sleek, silky Eyrie Chardonnay Dundee Hills 2013 (90, \$27) glides into the finish on pretty Asian pear, cardamom and cream flavors.

Typical of the better reds from 2011, the dark and spicy Eminent Domaine Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge 2011 (92, \$40) dances lightly and goes deep with its currant, plum and clove flavors. But even typically high quality wines could disappoint in this vintage, as with Domaine Serene's Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Evenstad Reserve 2011 (87, \$65), whose 2010 bottling earned a spot on Wine Spectator Top 10 Wines of 2013. It's still a good wine, but too-gritty tannins detract from a lean core of herb-accented berry flavors.

As we get ready to close the books on 2011, only 26 percent of all wines from the vintage, reviewed over the past three years, reached 90 or more points. For 2010, the number is 49 percent, and for 2012 so far it's 50 percent. For Pinot Noir alone, the numbers are 53 percent in 2010, 32 percent in 2011 and 59 percent in 2012.

Aside from variable vintages, folks in Oregon are abuzz over a renewal in activity involving outside entities, including a wave of newly arrived French vigneron.



It was a moment of validation for Oregon wine in 1987 when Robert Drouhin, patriarch of the Beaune-based négociant firm, bought 225 acres in Dundee Hills and planted a vineyard. Over the years, the wines of Domaine Drouhin Oregon, made by Robert's daughter Véronique Drouhin-Boss, have earned a reputation for finesse and consistency. In 2012, the estate's signature Pinot Noir Dundee Hills (92, \$45) qualifies as a standout among widely available bottlings for its complexity, harmony and focus. In December 2013, DDO brought its estate holdings to more than 500 acres by purchasing the 279-acre Roserock Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills when Pacific Wine Partners sold off its extensive plantings.

Dominique Lafon of Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Meursault has been a hands-on consultant to Evening Land since its inception in 2007, mapping out the geology of its home Seven Springs Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills and setting a style that has lifted the winery into the top rank of Oregon producers.

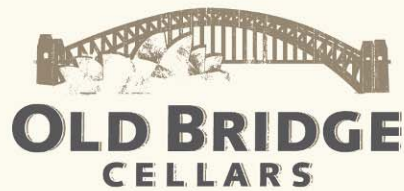
Louis-Michel Liger-Belair joined the party in 2012. Liger-Belair, who makes La Romanée at his own domaine in Vosne-Romanée, consults with owner Mark Tarlov on two projects: Chapter 24, in which Liger-Belair also has an ownership stake, and Maison l'Envoyé, in which Tarlov (a cofounder of Evening Land) has partnered with Old Bridge Cellars, a U.S. importer of Australian wines led by Gavin Speight. Mike D. Etzel, son of Mike Etzel, was the on-site winemaker for both labels in 2012 and 2013, and now he's custom-trimming grape bunches and experimenting with concrete eggs for a pair of \$300 bottlings coming soon under Chapter 24's new 00 line.

To reduce alcohol naturally in the wines without sacrificing ripe flavors, Liger-Belair uses techniques he learned from winemaker Henri Mayer when they dealt with high sugar levels in 2003. Tarlov says that every choice during the winemaking process aims to minimize alcohol conversion, with particular emphasis on natural yeasts, yeast nutrition and temperature control. Frequent pump-overs and punch-downs in open-top fermentors also help alcohol dissipate.

Tasting through the 2013s at the winery in September, I found plenty of opulence along with a sense of spaciousness and a transparency in texture that reflects alcohol levels of 12.6 percent to 13 percent in the finished wines. The 2012s in release are scoring in the low- to mid-90s, led by the Maison L'Envoyé Pinot Noir Willamette Valley The Attaché 2012 (94, \$40), which unfurls blackberry, floral and white pepper flavors with finesse, and the Chapter 24 Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (93, \$90), a ripe red whose currant and blackberry fruit dances deftly.



Visitors sample wines in the tasting room at Dundee-based Chapter 24 Vineyards, a new collaboration between Mark Tarlov, formerly of Evening Land, and Burgundy vintner Louis-Michel Liger-Belair.



In 2013, Beaune négociant Louis Jadot bought the 19-acre Resonance Vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton, and Jacques Lardière, Jadot's recently retired winemaker, made about 3,000 cases from it. Tasting from barrel at Lardière's temporary cellar at Trisaetum, I found a refreshing transparency, with bright raspberry, cherry and cinnamon flavors, in the various lots representing different clones and sections of the vineyard. (For the record, Sineann, which has excelled with Resonance Pinots since 2002, goes out with a 93-point 2012 (\$48), vibrant and expansive.)

Lardière grins with pleasure at the wines, but forms his words cautiously. "I think we have a chance to have something with Resonance," he says. "We taste the flavors but we don't know yet what comes from the ground or from the process." Jadot plans to add more vineyards and increase production in Oregon, but it's moving slowly. In early October, Jadot representatives visited several potential wineries and sites, but decided to see more vintages before determining how to proceed.

Also on the horizon is a new wine involving Jean-Nicolas Méo of Méo-Camuzet in Nuits-St.-Georges, Los Angeles music executive Jay Boberg and newly hired winemaker Adam Smith, who has his own Oregon winery, Eisold-Smith.

Domaine Drouhin is not the only established Oregon winery making changes. At Evening Land, Charles Banks of Terroir Capital bought into the existing partnership and installed Rajat Parr, the well-known sommelier, as president and Sashi Moorman, Banks' longtime winemaker at Sandhi and Domaine de la Côte in Sta. Rita Hills, as winemaker. The team is adding 6 acres of Chardonnay to the 70-acre Seven Springs Vineyard, grafting over what had been marginal Pinot Noir.

Under the new regime, the Evening Land label will exist mainly for wines made from purchased grapes. Starting with 2014, estate wines will fly under a Seven Springs Vineyard label. Tasted at the winery from barrel and tank, the mouthfilling 2014s show balance and finesse, with the same intensity and depth as previous years.

At Soter Vineyards, founder Tony Soter has expanded the Planet Oregon and North Valley lines to reach 25,000 cases and complement his Mineral Springs estate wines. The Soter Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Mineral Springs Ranch 2012 (95, \$60) hits the top tier for its vibrant expressiveness, with black cherry, red plum, sassafras and dead leaf flavors on a long and silky frame.

The Planet Oregon bottling is an affordably priced statewide Pinot Noir blend from certified sustainable vineyards—the 2012 (90, \$20), juicy with red plum, currant and dusky spice flavors, shows impressive intensity for its price—while the North Valley lineup in 2012 includes Willamette Valley bottlings of Pinot Noir (90, \$35) and Chardonnay (90, \$30).

The pioneering winery Sokol Blosser added no new vineyards, but a new generation seems to have rediscovered its mojo. The lineup of 2012s, the strongest in years, includes the fresh, vibrant Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Orchard Block (93, \$70), light on its feet but dense with plum and currant fruit, and a harmonious Pinot Noir Dundee Hills 2012 (91, \$38), offering a generous core of spicy, mineral-accented flavors.



Another big new presence is Kendall-Jackson, which not only purchased two of Pacific Wine Partners' other vineyards—the 250-acre Zena Crown in Eola-Amity Hills and the 198-acre Gran Moraine in Yamhill-Carlton—but also set up its headquarters on another acquisition, the 80-acre former Soléna Estate in Yamhill-Carlton. Though most of the grapes are going to Kendall-Jackson's light, silky La Crema Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (90, \$30), with a nose of raspberry and cherry, the new Gran Moraine label has a dark and peppery cast to its debut Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District 2012 (90, \$45).

Excellent values abound in great vintages such as 2012, when high quality fruit is abundant. Regional Willamette Valley blends are an especially good source for value, appealing to those who prefer lighter-style, crisp-textured wines.

Among the success stories this year are several Pinots that hit the jackpot at less than \$30 a bottle, in quantities of 5,000 cases or more. Look for the Ken Wright Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (92, \$25), centered on notes of black cherry and mint, or the sleek and inviting Soléna Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Grande Cuvée 2012 (92, \$25), juicy with red and black cherry and gentle spice flavors.

Just a step behind are the fresh Ponzi Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Tavola 2012 (91, \$25), offering a cherry and raspberry core; the polished Elk Cove Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (90, \$29), with currant and blackberry flavors finishing with finesse; and the deftly persistent Evening Land Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2012 (90, \$28), showing delicacy to its cherry and floral flavors.

At less than \$20, the number of wines produced at 5,000 or more cases increases significantly. The tangy A to Z Wineworks Pinot Noir Oregon 2012 (89, \$19) offers bright raspberry and espresso flavors, while the welcoming Erath Pinot Noir Oregon 2012 (87, \$19) delivers pretty notes of raspberry and spice on a soft frame.

In the same category are a number of fresh-style whites such as the vivid Soléna Pinot Gris Willamette Valley 2013 (90, \$20); the polished Elk Cove Pinot Gris Willamette Valley 2013 (89, \$19); the crisp Erath Pinot Gris Oregon 2012 (88, \$14); and the lively Eola Hills Pinot Gris Oregon 2013 (87, \$13). For a lovely Riesling, try the light and gently sweet Willamette Valley Vineyards Riesling Willamette Valley 2013 (87, \$14), with pear and spice flavors.

The ups and downs of recent years continue with the 2013 and just-completed 2014 vintages. Both are intriguing, but for different reasons.

A warm growing season in 2013 climaxed with heat spikes in mid-September. It looked like an opulent vintage, and then it rained. And rained. And rained some more. Some sites counted 9 inches of rain in a week. Most of Willamette Valley got around 4 inches. "I never saw rain so sideways here, and it hit when everything was pretty damn ripe," says Rollin Soles of Roco.

Many of the 2013s I tasted at wineries in early autumn displayed precise flavors and even the sort of delicacy that made 2010 and 2011 so charming. Elk Cove's 2013 Pinot Noir Mount Richmond bottling, for example, was even more open and expressive than the estate's 2012s, many of which rated in the low- to mid-90s.



"If you were careful on the sorting table, there was a lot of great wine to be made," notes Adam Campbell of Elk Cove about 2013. "Some early picks made nice wines, and sometimes I beat myself up about not picking before the rain. But I wouldn't have picked that early, so it was worth weathering the storm."

For many, rain waterlogged their already-flavorful grapes. Most vintners employed a traditional Burgundian technique, *saignée*, which drains off some of the free-run juice from the must before fermentation. This concentrates color and other elements, and the *saignée* fraction can also make a pleasant rosé.

At Roco, Soles concentrated the *saignée*—and only the *saignée*—for his red wines in a reverse-osmosis machine before adding it back to the fermenting wine. "Think about it," Soles says. "With *saignée* you're taking out the center of the grape. To turn it into rosé is like taking out the heart, the acids, the fresh fruit of the grape. So we basically remove the water and put that beautiful center back into the wine." Tasted from barrel, Roco's 2013s show ripe, cleanly articulated flavors against a lovely transparent framework.

Other wineries used different means to fashion very good to outstanding wines in 2013. For the producers I visited—admittedly from the state's top tier—2013 will be anything but a washout. But choose carefully; the uneven quality could approximate that of 2011.

The early word on 2014 is upbeat. It was another warm year, but with no major heat spikes. The crop was abundant, with harvest coming up to three weeks early in some places. "For me it was a cross between 2009 and 2012," says Soles. "There was no bird pressure, no disease pressure, nothing to weed out at the sorting table."

The only problem was finding room in the wineries to ferment the huge volume of wine. On Oct. 1, every possible vessel was in play at Beaux Frères, where Etzel had to turn himself sideways to squeeze through between the tanks. Despite the high yields, vintners say the wines are dense and plush.

Eight New Names to Know

Chapter 24 & Maison L'Envoyé

Rethinking Oregon

After Evening Land's owners decided in 2011 not to renew the five-year contract of founding CEO Mark Tarlov, the film producer-turned-vintner wasn't ready to retire from wine. Having recruited Burgundian Dominique Lafon to consult with Evening Land, he found another Côte d'Or star for his next project—Louis-Michel Liger-Belair, whose estate holdings include La Romanée and other Vosne-Romanée parcels. Together they launched Chapter 24, a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*.



Liger-Belair introduced a series of innovations he learned working with the legendary Burgundy winemaker Henri Jayer to ferment ripe vintages without extracting too much alcohol. The resulting wines billow with expansively ripe flavors and a beguiling transparency, with alcohol levels mostly at 12.6 percent to 13.2 percent. Three dozen vineyards around Willamette Valley make the signature Fire + Flood wines. Those from volcanic soils end up in the bottling called The Fire, steelier than the broader and more expressive The Flood, from sedimentary soils. A reserve wine blends both, and a pair of \$300 bottlings called 00 are made in what is described as an entirely hands-off process.

In a related project, Tarlov partnered with the U.S.-based Australian importer Old Bridge Cellars for Maison l'Envoyé, which also makes and bottles wines in Burgundy and soon Australia. The stunning Oregon wines aim for regional identity, not single-vineyard specificity.

Chapter 24 Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 00 Hyland 2012 (94, \$300)

Chapter 24 Pinot Noir Willamette Valley The Last Chapter Pinot Noir 2012 (93, \$90)

Maison L'Envoyé Pinot Noir Willamette Valley The Attaché 2012 (94, \$40)

Aubichon

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