

BURGUNDIAN GRAPES WITH AN AMERICAN ACCENT

Beautiful, unassuming, naturally cool and with a love of great gastronomy – if there were a dating app for wine regions, Oregon and Burgundy would make the perfect match. Both are famed for making top quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, varieties which bewitch wine lovers with their enigmatic diversity and sheer deliciousness.

While there is tangible French influence in Oregon, the state has forged its own reputation as a source of outstanding Pinot Noir and Chardonnay – and the same applies to its southern neighbour, California. Lovers of Burgundy have a wealth of fantastic wine to discover in these two states, but as always with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, it pays to have the inside knowledge.

Pinot Noir was first planted in Oregon more than 50 years ago. Granted, Burgundy can trace the variety back at least 650 years but even so, Oregon boasts longer history with Pinot Noir than most New World regions.

Similarities are often drawn between Oregon and Burgundy, although direct French influence in Oregon winemaking only dates from the late 1980s, when Maison Joseph Drouhin established a winery there. Having been impressed by the award-winning wines of Eyrie Vineyard, Oregon's original Pinot pioneers, Domaine Drouhin now stand alongside them as one of the state's most celebrated producers.

Their approach to viticulture was decidedly Burgundian from the outset. *"We planted high-density vineyards,"* says winemaker Véronique Drouhin. *"In Burgundy, we plant at 10,000 vines per hectare. In Oregon it is normally around 4,500 but we went for 7,500."* The thinking behind this technique is to increase competition between the plants, thereby reducing the volume of grapes being produced. The result is greater concentration and complexity of flavour in the wine.

The comparison most often made between Burgundy and Oregon is between their climates. Thanks to their comparable latitudes, they have almost the same amount of sunlight each year, although Oregon is usually warmer and drier in the summer months. There is also a bigger range of elevation available in Oregon, with Drouhin growing vines at up to 800 feet above sea level. This gives cooler nights, helping to retain the crisp acidity and fresh fruit character that is so integral to great Pinot Noir.

Yet the resulting wines from both regions can taste significantly different in style. Jacques Lardière made 42 vintages of Burgundy for Maison Louis Jadot before he started making

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Pinot Noir in Oregon for Jadot’s label Résonance – but as MD Thibault Gagey puts it, “*our idea is not at all to make Burgundy in Oregon!*”

One of the main differences is “*the fruit intensity that is very much present in Oregon Pinots,*” according to Thibault Gagey. Véronique Drouhin agrees, adding that there are more black fruit flavours in Oregon Pinot Noir, whereas Burgundy tends towards red fruit flavours. She also mentions that the grapes develop thicker skins in Oregon, which creates deeper colour and “*beautiful tannic texture – like cashmere.*”

Capturing the quality of great Pinot Noir relies on minimal intervention in the winery. That philosophy applies as much in America as it does in France – or indeed anywhere else in the winemaking world.

At Nicolas-Jay, an Oregon estate founded by music industry veteran Jay Boberg and Jean-Nicolas Méo of Méo-Camuzet, they use ‘fundamentally the same techniques’ to make their Pinot Noir in Oregon as they would in Burgundy. At Résonance they even go so far as to import oak barrels from their own cooperage in the Côte d’Or. However, the intention is always for oak to complement rather than dominate the flavour of the wine, and for that reason, Nicolas-Jay only uses around 30% new oak.

The idea behind minimal intervention in the winery is, of course, to facilitate the maximum expression of terroir. Oregonians freely admit that they are still learning about the best winemaking areas in the state, and that there is still huge untapped potential.

After 30 years of winemaking there, Domaine Drouhin have discovered that certain terroirs display specific characteristics year after year. “*The Dundee Hills region has a spicy aroma and soft texture that is reminiscent of Chambolle-Musigny, while Eola-Amity Hills is more like Gevrey-Chambertin with its firmer structure,*” according to Véronique Drouhin.



Boberg agrees, describing Dundee Hills as having “*more elegance and aromatics [while] Eola-Amity tends more towards black fruit and structure,*” adding that “*the fruit from Yamhill-Carlton tends to have more power and colour than other viticultural areas.*”

Soil in Oregon varies from igneous deposits to marine sediments, giving a range of colours and textures that is an integral influence of the variation of styles produced. However, the famous limestone of Burgundy is nowhere to be

FOUR TO TRY

Domaine Drouhin, Cuvée Laurène Pinot Noir, Dundee Hills

Everything that makes Oregon Pinot great is in this wine: vivid fruit, complex earth and spice aromas, silky tannins and great ageability.

Nicolas-Jay, Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley

This 10-vineyard blend is charismatic and engaging with cranberry and redcurrant aromas plus gorgeous floral perfume.

Résonance, Pinot Noir, Yamhill-Carlton

Pale, savoury and restrained, this is perhaps the Oregon Pinot Noir which is most similar to Burgundy in style.

Hyde de Villaine, de la Guerra Chardonnay, Carneros

Described by Jancis Robinson as “*a revelation*”, this single-site Chardonnay has all the savoury character and tension of great white Burgundy.



found – another significant difference between the two regions.

But it's not just about reds. Wherever Pinot Noir is planted, Chardonnay will never be far away. However, Chardonnay accounts for less than 6% of plantings in Oregon. Domaine Drouhin released their first Chardonnay bottling in 1996, but Véronique Drouhin thinks it is still too soon for them to know the best sites for the variety. Certain Oregon producers are developing a reputation for great Chardonnay, but the most exciting examples of the grape tend to come from California.

The sunshine state has almost 40,000 hectares of Chardonnay, compared with only 400 hectares in Oregon. (For Pinot Noir, it's around 15,000 hectares and 4,900 hectares respectively). For many years, Californian Chardonnay was full-bodied, high in alcohol and rich in flavours with syrupy fruit flavours and plentiful sweet oak spice. And people loved it. Indeed, there is still a great deal of it made in this way.

More recently, however, there has been a move towards greater subtlety. That tends to mean earlier picking to give lower alcohol and higher, more refreshing acidity. It also changes the fruit character from the tropical spectrum of pineapple and mango towards more citric flavours. The temptation is to describe such styles as more Burgundian.

At Hyde de Villaine in Sonoma County, “Burgundian traditions and ideas permeate every aspect of our endeavours,” says their winemaker Stéphane Vivier. You would expect nothing less of an estate which was co-founded by Aubert de Villaine of the legendary Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

Terroir is all-important here too, of course. The Hyde de Villaine vineyard is in the Carneros region of the Napa Valley – a cooler subzone of the region, which has forged a reputation for producing great Chardonnay thanks to producers such as Saintsbury, Ramey, Schug and Hyde de Villaine themselves.

The soil of Carneros is rich with clay, which is tempting to compare with the Kimmeridgian soil of Chablis, although their respective styles are really quite different. Elsewhere in California, soils vary from sand and silt in the Santa Maria Valley to granite and limestone in the Santa Lucia Highlands. That makes it impossible to generalise – but this variety is a good thing, creating delicious variations of style in both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir across the state. As with Burgundy, knowing the house style of individual producers is just as important as knowing the different terroirs.

Whenever Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is discussed, making comparisons with Burgundy is irresistible. Indeed, describing a wine as “Burgundian” is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to a wine. As winemaking evolves, producers are continuing to discover the full potential of their terroir. Just as Burgundy has its system of premiers and grands crus, certain vineyards in Oregon and California already have a well-established reputation for excellence.

French influence in Oregon and California has resulted in some of the most exciting and delicious Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays on the planet. These wines will always be different to their Burgundian ancestors, however, with fuller body and bolder fruit. In many ways, they are the best of both worlds – and that is something to be celebrated.

Richard Hemming M.W.

DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

The five cuvées of Domaine Drouhin are an ideal introduction to the wonder of Oregon wine. Arthur Chardonnay combines both richness and tension, giving fruit ripeness as well as precise structure. Among their Pinot Noirs, the main Dundee Hills blend is a masterclass in fruit clarity and sophisticated

structure, with the graceful tannin that is so central to their winemaking philosophy. But for the ultimate experience of Oregon Pinot Noir, their cuvée Laurène is one of the very best in the region, with incredible fruit intensity and bewitching spice opulence that promises superb ageing potential.



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