

Two Postcards from Oregon

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 02 August 2011 14:34

You have got to see this area to believe how beautiful it is. I was here four years ago and was to rushed to take it all in. This trip, I made sure that there was enough time to visit the wineries, talk to the owners and winemakers, and appreciate the sheer beauty of the landscape.

Yesterday I was sitting in the shade under a majestic tree called an “Edible Chestnut Tree.” I was actually studying my notes from all the wineries. An elderly gentleman came up to me and introduced himself as Jim Maresh. (Maresh is pronounced “Marsh.”)He is 85 years old and in superb physical condition. He is also the owner of the “Edible Chestnut Tree.” He allowed me to continue to use his shade. Jim was a co-worker and friend of David Lett, who is generally regarded as the leader in introducing Pinot Noir to the Willamette Valley. David’s Nickname was “Papa Pinot.” In the late sixties David Lett, Dick Erath, Dick Ponzi. and Charles Curry, along with Jim Maresh, were convinced that the pinot grape would survive very well in the Willamette Valley soil. The local farmers were of a different opinion and told our friends just named that the chance of the pinot grape surviving in the Willamette Valley was about as good as the chance of discovering oil in Connecticut. However, sheer determination – and the fact that David, an engineer by training, had done his research very carefully – would win in the end. David planted his Pinot Noir Grapes at a vineyard called “Eyrie” in 1966, and harvested his first Pinot Noir crop in 1970. His research and hard work had paid off and the rest is history. Soon thereafter, two more wineries opened; and today, 50 years later, there are close to 200 wineries in the Willamette Valley and several other wine growing areas.

In addition to the soil, there was another reason that the grapes did so well. Land that had little or no value to the traditional farmer – i.e. the steep hillsides – was ideal for wine grapes. Up until this time, the farmers had survived on crops grown on the flat surface of the valley floor. They had no use for the steep hillsides. Grape producers, however, found the steep hillsides ideal. The hillsides provided good air drainage and the roots of the vines were allowed to search for nourishment in the mineral rich volcanic soil.

It was made abundantly clear to me that the producers of Pinot Noir Wine, in the area that I was visiting, receive their fruit from three different venues. The producer can grow 100% of his own fruit, he can purchase 100% from an outside source, or he can do both. Those that purchase fruit on the outside, for whatever reason, usually do so through long term arrangements and contract acreage. The outside sources available to the wine producers are no less than excellent. The growers of grapes that are for sale went through the same exercise as David Lett, i.e. research the SOIL, and make a determination that this particular plot of land will or will not yield fruit that is suitable for wine production. One example of this practice is Shea Vineyards. Shea produces 140 acres of grapes. He sells 75% of his crop each year and keeps the remainder for his own wine production. The secret to his success, and that of other growers,

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is no secret at all. The growers have the soil. Add to this hard work, an EXPERIENCED year-round crew, and close attention to detail and the result is quality yield. As testament to the quality of the fruit that the wine producers purchase on the outside, sometimes the name of the source of the fruit appears on the label of the wine. For example, Panther Creek Winery will show 2008 Panther Creek Pinot Noir, Shea Vineyard.

Allow me to make one last point on this very long postcard. I met some terrific people at the wineries that I visited. During most conversations they always made an effort to mention the close knit community spirit that exists among the wineries and the employees. It is indeed a common denominator and positive force in the success of the wine industry for the area. One young man said to me, "Hey, why not? We are all in this together." I think that says it all.

There is so much more that I want to cover. Oh well! That is a good excuse to go back to Oregon.

WINESPEAK

What is an AVA? AVA stands for American Viticultural Area. This designation is awarded to an area by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The AVA designation is the American substitute for the word Appellation. Should an area be awarded the AVA status, 85% of the grapes in the wine must be from that area. The designation states that the climate, soil, and elevation properties give the wine a certain characteristic. The Willamette Valley is one such designation.

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A Second Postcard from Oregon

So much is made of the fantastic Pinot Noir from Oregon that people tend to overlook the terrific opportunities that are presented by the white varietals. Vintners will generally produce a higher percentage of Pinot Noir along with a smaller percentage of either Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Riesling, Viognier, Pinot Blanc, and yes, some sparkling offerings (probably from Argyle vineyards; their products get to the Lowcountry.)

Let's take a look at a few. The Old World Home for Pinot Gris is Alsace. At some time in the Twentieth Century, various clones of Pinot Gris made their way to The US and in the process made Oregon the Home of Pinot Gris in the New World. In 1966 David Lett (from the last article) planted Pinot Gris vines and a few years later his first release was sold to a famous McMinnville, Oregon Restaurant called Nicks. It is now 2011 and Pinot Gris from Eyrie Vineyards is still offered on the Wine List. Oregon Pinot Gris is very food friendly, especially with salmon.

Chardonnay should also be on your "must try list" of white wines from Oregon. From their old home in Burgundy, France to their new home in Oregon, (remember that Oregon and Burgundy are on the same latitude) Chardonnay is enjoying newer winemaking techniques using newer Dijon clones over the older clone #108. The newer clones are more adaptable to the Northwest climate. This means more reliable ripening and better flavor expression. There has also been a move away from oak aging towards stainless steel aging and fermenting. This means less buttery flavors and more crisp and fruity flavors. Enjoy as an aperitif or with halibut, shellfish, or even pasta.

Most people say that the old world home of Riesling is Alsace or Germany. That may have been true at the beginning. However, Riesling is pervasive throughout planet earth. It thrives anywhere and Oregon is no exception. At the present time, Oregon is producing world class Riesling, especially when the winemaker makes his Riesling DRY. Try a food pairing with Chehalem Vineyards dry Riesling, which is available in most retail stores in the Lowcountry.

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How about trying a Viognier? It will go well with just about any food preparation or even a few hands of Bridge. Viognier from Oregon comes from the warmer regions located in the south of Oregon. How does it differ from the other whites? This particular varietal is heavier than Pinot Gris, sweeter than Riesling and carries fruit characteristics far removed from Chardonnay. That should make it a popular choice for a wide variety of folks.

I must interrupt this postcard and finish it from Albuquerque, NM. Thank you, Oregon for allowing us to visit your vineyards, and special congratulations to all Oregonians for being the most polite and courteous automobile drivers that I have ever seen.

I am stopping in Albuquerque to visit the Gruet Winery. I know that it is not the most direct route to Beaufort, SC, from Oregon, however, I have the time and I could not resist the temptation to visit.

Matt Kramer writes for *The Wine Spectator* Magazine. He is quoted as saying the following about the Gruet Winery. "When I tell you that a winery in New Mexico makes terrific sparkling wine, you might say, 'you gotta be kidding.' I'm not. And neither are they, Gruet winery is the real deal, in every sense. Their sparkling wine is in America's top rank. The price is astounding for the quality; if there is a better sparkling wine made in America – or anywhere else for that matter – that delivers this kind of quality for that low a price, I have not tasted it." I agree with Matt, and the good news is that Gruet is very plentiful in the Lowcountry.

Gruet was producing Champagne near Epernay, France in the early 1950's. By adhering to strict quality standards, the growth of the winery rose to over 1,000,000 bottles per year. With a desire to expand, and few possibilities available in France, the Gruet Family chose to set up a second winery in New Mexico. The climate, soil conditions, and altitude were all conducive to growing grapes. The warm days and cool nights would offer the specific aromas needed to produce excellent sparkling wine. Evidently it all worked very well. Today the winery is thriving and enjoys national distribution of their products.

WINESPEAK:

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What is the difference between **Champagne** and **sparkling wine**? Champagne is a specific type of sparkling wine, produced in a specific way, in a certain region of France known as Champagne. Sparkling wine is wine made with carbon dioxide bubbles and produced in any area of the earth other than the Champagne region of France Voila! Thus as we see above, Gruet could NOT call the American product Champagne.

Next time: Back in Europe somewhere.