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WILLAMETTE VALLEY WINE

The History

Early pioneers, after months on the Oregon Trail, finally reached a broad green valley of deep forests and wide open meadows. This fertile valley had a mild climate, plenty of water, and soil that promised healthy crops. Today the Willamette Valley is the largest and most recognized winegrowing region in Oregon.

While wine grapes have been grown in Oregon since the mid-1800s, they were not present in any organized fashion in the Willamette Valley until 1965. That was the year David Lett and his wife Diana of The Eyrie Vineyards planted their 3,000 Pinot noir vines (plus a few odd Pinot gris) on a carefully-chosen, south-facing slope in the Dundee Hills. A Utah native, Lett was on his way to dental school in San Francisco in 1963 when he encountered Napa Valley. After what he describes as an epiphany, he forsook dental school to study viticulture at University of California at Davis. Two years later he was on his way to Oregon.

It is a safe bet that without Pinot noir there would be no Oregon wine industry as we know it today. Pinot noir was the first post-Prohibition vitis vinifera variety planted in the north Willamette Valley and the reason Lett came to Oregon. He planted his vines in the Dundee Hills after a rigorous study of western Oregon's geography and climate. "I was convinced that these grapes belonged in this climate," said Lett. The Letts produced their first wines in 1970.

Though it would be several years of hardship before Lett was proven right, others felt called to this new wine region. In 1968, native Californian and engineer Dick Erath moved with his wife and two young sons to Oregon. His first plantings were on the Chehalem Ridge. He established Erath Vineyards in the Dundee Hills and made his first commercial wines in 1972.

Close on his heels was Myron Redford of Amity Vineyards, who came to the area from Seattle and began making wine in 1976 near Amity. David and Ginny Adelsheim planted their vineyard on Chehalem Ridge in the early 1970s and made their first wines, from grapes purchased from eastern Washington growers, in 1977. Their first crush with Willamette Valley grapes was in 1978.

With the 1977 vintage, Elk Cove Vineyards and Sokol Blosser Winery joined the mini-rush to make wines as other small vineyards and wineries established themselves in the north end of the valley and near Salem to the south. Like other pioneers, these new wineries relied heavily on Washington grapes in their early days, making Sauvignon blanc, Merlot, and Riesling until their vineyards were mature.

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And while these early winemakers produced wines from Washington grapes, they planted mostly Pinot noir, some Riesling and Chardonnay. For the early settlers here the prize was, and always has been, Pinot noir.

It was not an easy beginning. Oregon wine quality was erratic in the early days. At their best, most wines did not meet the expectations of consumers more accustomed to the bigger, richer style standards set by the new wave of premium California wineries. The opening of Nick's Italian Café in McMinnville in February of 1977 helped enhance the image of local wines. Nick's met with favorable reviews and lured Portlanders to the country to sample its delicious Italian food. Owner Nick Peirano embraced the new wineries, and his was the first restaurant in the area to feature their wines. Local winemakers found in Nick's not only an ambassador, but also a place to gather and share their news, information, plans, and dreams. Nick's is now a James Beard award-winning restaurant.

Though they started out modestly, the earliest wineries continue to be family-owned businesses as well as leaders in the industry today. However, the industry has grown tremendously and continues to change. A subtle shift in winery demographics first occurred in 1977 when Bill and Susan Sokol Blosser built their winery near Dundee. Until then, wineries were notorious for being housed in barns, sheds, and former turkey packing plants. Rather than starting out as something else, Sokol Blosser was designed and built as a winery.

Soon after, Fred and Mary Benoit relocated from Lane County and built Chateau Benoit (now Anne Amie) near Lafayette. The second wave came into the game with somewhat better funding. REX HILL, Veritas Vineyard (now Chehalem), and Yamhill Valley Vineyards were among those with deeper pockets than their predecessors.

Late in 1979, a series of events transpired to bring international acclaim to Oregon's fledgling wine industry. At the 1979 Olympics of Wine held in Paris, a Yamhill County Pinot noir from The Eyrie Vineyards placed third in a blind tasting of some of the world's finest Pinots.

Burgundian wine producer Robert Drouhin could not believe the results, and in early 1980 staged his own tasting in Beaune. Here, The Eyrie's 1975 South Block Reserve Pinot Noir placed second against a Drouhin 1959 Chambolle-Musigny. It was not to be believed!

Vineyards continued to be planted in the valley, and in 1983 a sensational vintage again propelled Oregon's Pinot noir wines into the international spotlight. The 1983s were tasted in New York City in 1985 against some of the world's best Burgundies. Again, the tasting was blind with a panel of wine judges. Oregon wines dominated the tasting. The quality of Willamette Valley Pinot noir was more than mere coincidence.

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The New York tasting spurred another growth spurt in wine country; however, this one had international implications. Véronique Drouhin, Robert's daughter, spent the 1986 harvest in Oregon, working at several wineries. Meanwhile, several new, small wineries opened their doors. In 1987 Robert Drouhin purchased vineyard land in the Dundee Hills. His first wines were made by Véronique in 1987.

Interest from Australia came from Brian Croser of the famed Petaluma Winery. Croser, with encouragement from former Texan Rollin Soles, became convinced that the northern Willamette Valley is one of the best locations to produce sparkling wines. Croser established Argyle Winery in Dundee in 1987 with Soles as his winemaker. Argyle since then has produced some of the best sparkling wines in the United States.

Closer to home, Maryland-based wine critic Robert Parker, with his brother-in-law Michael Etzel, purchased property on Chehalem Ridge in 1987 and began developing a small vineyard. The winery, known as Beaux Frères, produced its first wines in 1991.

Since the early 1990s, the Willamette Valley has attracted many more wineries, everything from small family-run operations producing less than 500 cases to large and well-financed facilities producing more than 100,000 cases. And the growth of the Oregon wine industry continues steadily, with new vineyards and wineries being added every year. In the Willamette Valley, wineries number more than 530 with nearly 20,000 acres planted to vineyards. In 2015, the region celebrated 50 years since the first Pinot noir plantings in 1965. With the growth of outstanding restaurants, charming inns and a first-class wine country resort, the Willamette Valley has become a destination for tourists seeking the perfect Pinot noir.

[Click here for an interactive timeline of Willamette Valley Wine history.](#)