

OREGON'S BURGUNDY

Patterning itself after the home of France's classic Pinot Noir, the Willamette Valley is becoming a wine country destination unto itself

Linda Murphy, Special to The Chronicle
Sunday, September 9, 2007



(09-09) 04:00 PDT McMinnville , Ore. --

"It looks like Corton, doesn't it?" asked one man admiringly as our group gazed up at the tightly spaced rows of Pinot Noir grapevines hugging the hillside at Stoller Vineyards in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

It did look a bit like France's famed Corton, a tree-topped hill in Burgundy's Côte de Beaune region that's caressed by vines on its lower slopes. Corton is home to some of the world's finest Pinot Noir wines, and while accepting Stoller as Le Corton takes a bit of imagination, Willamette Valley vintners use the hill as inspiration as they try to produce Pinot Noirs rivaling those of Burgundy. And they're getting there.

Still, why would a Bay Area Pinot Noir buff travel to Oregon, when fine wines are made much closer to home, in the Russian River Valley, Carneros and Monterey County?

First, the wines are getting better, and fast gaining critical praise. The best Pinots, and those from the small rising stars, are sold in the tasting rooms, with little chance of finding their way to California store shelves.

Two, the vast majority of Willamette Valley's 200 wineries are Pinot Noir specialists. They make a bit of Pinot Gris, Riesling and Gewürztraminer, but Pinot Noir is their passion, and they don't let Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot or Syrah divert their energies from making Pinots as silky and elegant as those in Burgundy.

The sprawling valley is an intoxicating breath of fresh air from the more crowded and upscale Napa Valley, and more compact than Sonoma County. In fact, it looks a lot like Napa did 30 years ago, when pastureland and orchards buffered the vineyards, when agriculture wasn't a monoculture and when the winery owner was likely the one pouring samples in the tasting room.

When one drives through Willamette Valley wine country, one is truly in the country, yet there are plenty of fine-dining establishments and comfortable motels and bed and breakfast inns to satisfy all but the luxury-seeker. Just a few years ago, wine country visitors stayed in Portland and made day trips to Willamette Valley; today, the area is a destination unto itself, with good food and lodging walking through the door opened wide by the wine industry.

The place also has a French flair that comes entirely from Willamette Valley vintners' zeal to make Burgundian-style wine. Many wine labels have French references, among them Domaine Serene's Côte Sud Vineyard and Scott Paul Wines' La Paulée Pinot Noir.

Scott Wright, owner of Scott Paul (radio listeners may remember him as Shadow Stevens), makes Willamette Valley Pinot Noir and also imports Burgundian versions of the grape, selling them in his tasting room in Carlton - a

surprising find in such a tiny town.

Card-carrying Burgundians are here, too: Domaine Drouhin Oregon was established in 1987 in Dundee by Burgundy's famed Maison Joseph Drouhin, and makes some of the region's best wines. Burgundy native Bernard Lecroute owns WillaKenzie Estate in Yamhill; it's a spectacular place to taste Pinot Noir.

Upscale restaurants such as the Dundee Bistro in Dundee and the Painted Lady in Newberg offer red and white Burgundies on their wine lists, along with local bottles (and only the rare California Pinot Noir).

Boeuf bourguignon and *coq au vin* can be found on restaurant menus in McMinnville, Willamette Valley's cultural hub. Yet like their French counterparts, folks here really dig the pig - chops, loins, shoulders and bellies - as perfect matches for Pinot Noir.

One pork-out lunch at Dundee Bistro - owned by the Ponzi family, one in the first wave of vintners to plant wine grapes in Oregon in the late 1960s and early 1970s - began with "porchetta," a pork tenderloin stuffed with pig cheeks and wrapped in bacon. Every Wednesday is Pork-N-Pinot Night.

Nick's Italian Cafe in McMinnville has been a local vintner hangout since 1977, when Nick Peirano began serving his handmade pastas and roasted meats. His daughter, Carmen, who trained in Bay Area kitchens, now does the cooking, and one of her signature dishes is roasted pork loin with pork sausage - perfect with Pinot.

Local vinophiles even have their own Pinot Noir glass, a machine-blown crystal stem created by Austrian glassware master Georg Riedel, just for Oregon Pinot Noir. It's used mostly in tasting rooms, and Oregon vintners swear the glass makes their wines taste better than any other crystal. I'm not convinced there is much difference between the Oregon glass and other Riedel Pinot Noir stemware, but you can't knock local pride.

Even Willamette Valley lodging is unassuming in a country-French way. The major cities of McMinnville and Newberg (combined population: 50,000) offer only modest motor lodges and bed and breakfasts; the closest luxury accommodations are an hour's drive away, in Portland.

Although Highway 99W, which connects Portland to the Willamette Valley, can slow to an escargot pace in each of the small cities along the route, the back roads are gloriously open and scenic, with vineyards, lush farmlands, grain elevators, red barns, cows, corkscrew-tailed pigs and produce stands laden with berries, orchard fruits, tomatoes, corn, lettuces and hazelnuts.

Many producers are advocates of "green" growing, with Stoller (in Dayton) and Sokol Blosser winery (Dundee) growing grapes organically and making wine in facilities that have earned LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) awards for their environmentally sound practices. Both wineries are happy to give tours, with appointments.

In the last three years, the federal government has recognized six districts within the valley's 5,400 square miles for their distinctive climates and elevations. While it's too soon to tell if these six appellations - Chehalem Mountains, Dundee Hills, Eola-Amity Hills, McMinnville, Ribbon Ridge and Yamhill-Carlton District - will produce equally distinctive wines, the naming of these subregions helps visitors locate where particular wineries are within the valley. The Willamette Valley Wineries Association (www.willamettewines.com) has a terrific map that designated the six appellations.

McMinnville is the most convenient home base for venturing into wine country. My favorite spot is the Yamhill-Carlton District and the two-block town of Carlton, just 15 minutes from McMinnville. Despite its flour-milling history and cow-town dust, Carlton has developed a cool wine vibe, with several tasting rooms, including Scott Paul Wines and the Carlton Winemakers Studio, where 10 small producers share equipment and offer their wines for tasting and sale.

The Dundee Hills is a fine region to visit as well, home to 30 wineries and vineyards, including domaines Serene and Drouhin. Don't miss Sokol Blosser, a winery eager to show off not only its Pinot Noirs, but also its sustainable farming and winemaking efforts.

Burgundy may be the birthplace of Pinot Noir, yet Willamette Valley certainly qualifies as being the "Burgundy of the West." Its ever-improving Pinot Noirs are the reason to visit, and its Corton, the Stoller Vineyard tasting room, is as good a place as any to start.

If you go

Getting there

McMinnville, the cultural center of the Willamette Valley, is 45 miles from Portland International Airport. Rent a car and drive southwest on Highway 99W. Shuttles run from Portland International to McMinnville and back, but those who want to fully explore wine country will need an automobile.

Where to stay

Best Western Vineyard Inn, 2035 S. Highway 99W, McMinnville. (503) 472-4900, www.book.bestwestern.com. Motel with 65 large, clean rooms, pool, fitness room and complimentary breakfast. \$84-\$130.

The Carlton Inn, 648 W. Main St., Carlton. (503) 852-7506 or (800) 252-6810, www.thecarltoninn.com. A homey, country-clutter bed and breakfast with four rooms (private baths) in a 1915 house; close to Carlton tasting rooms. \$125-\$175.

Steiger Haus Bed & Breakfast Inn, 360 SE Wilson St., McMinnville. (503) 472-0821, www.steigerhaus.com. Three suites and two guest rooms, each with private bath, in a European-style inn on a quiet residential street. \$95-\$140.

Where to eat

Dundee Bistro, 100-A SW 7th St., Dundee. (503) 554-1650, www.dundeebistro.com. Upscale cuisine highlighting local and organic products, with an extensive wine list. Lunch and dinner daily; dinner entrees \$13-\$24.

Harvest Fresh, 251 NE Third St., McMinnville. (503) 472-5740, www.harvestfresh.com. Natural foods store with a deli and excellent box lunches (\$7.50) to take on a day of wine tasting. Open daily.

Nick's Italian Café, 521 NE Third Street, McMinnville. (503) 434-4471. www.nicksitaliancafe.com. Five-course menu (\$45) features pork, seafood and lamb; Dungeness crab lasagna is a staple. A la carte available. Deep wine list. Dinner only; closed Monday.

NW Wine Bar, 326 NE Davis St., McMinnville. (503) 435-1295, www.nwwinebar.com. Wines by the taste, glass, flight and bottle. Paninis, pâté, salmon and other small plates, \$1 to \$7. Noon-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday; noon-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 3-8 p.m. Sunday.

What to do

Carlton Winemakers Studio, 801 N. Scott St., Carlton. (503) 852-6100, www.winemakersstudio.com. Open daily 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Sokol Blosser, 5000 NE Sokol Blosser Lane, Dundee. (503) 864-2282 or (800) 582-6668, www.sokolblosser.com. Open daily, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Call ahead for tour schedule.

Stoller Vineyards, 16161 NE Stoller Road, Dayton. (503) 864-3404, www.stollervineyards.com. Open by appointment.

WillaKenzie Estate, 19143 NE Laughlin Road, Yamhill. (503) 662-3280, www.willakenzie.com. Open noon-5 p.m. daily from Memorial Day through September; Friday-Sunday the rest of the year.

Evergreen Aviation Museum, 500 NE Captain Michael King Smith Way, McMinnville. (503) 434-4180, www.sprucegoose.org. Home to the Spruce Goose and 75 other aircraft and exhibits. Wine tasting. Open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Adults \$13, children 3-17 \$11, seniors \$12.

For more information

McMinnville Chamber of Commerce, (503) 472-6196, www.mcminnville.org.

Willamette Valley Wineries Association, (503) 646-2985, www.willamettewines.com. An online guide to Willamette Valley's 200 wineries, with listings for restaurants and lodging. Request an excellent brochure/map via the Web site.

Linda Murphy, formerly The Chronicle's wine editor, last wrote for Travel about the less expensive side of the Napa Valley. To comment, visit sfgate.com/travel.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/09/09/TREVRT6LH.DTL>

This article appeared on page C - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle