

Oregon wines establish a tiny toehold in France

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WINE NOTES

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The globe's top export markets for Oregon wine are Canada, Japan, the Caribbean Islands, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and South Korea, according to the 2009 National Agricultural Statistics Service Oregon Vineyard and Winery Report.

One nation is conspicuously missing from this list: France.

According to the California-based Wine Institute, France boasts the third-highest per-capita wine consumption in the world, trailing the miniscule markets of the Vatican City State and Norfolk Island (combined population: less than 3,000 residents). Some 44 million French folks drink wine, while only about 29 million Americans do.

France, it would appear, would be the perfect place for Oregon vintners to sell their wares. The French love pinot noir. We make pinot noir. The French love food-friendly finesse. We do food-friendly finesse.

There's just one problem: "They already make elegant pinot noir there," observes Jason Lett, president and winemaker at The Eyrie Vineyards in McMinnville.

Oregon wine came to the attention of the French as early as 1979, when a 1975 pinot noir from The Eyrie won the top pinot noir prize at an international tasting and competition in Paris. Then, in 1988, Burgundy-based Maison Joseph Drouhin launched Domaine Drouhin Oregon, a winery in Dayton.

But, aside from Drouhin, no other Oregon wine has been sold in France until last year, according to the Oregon Wine Board. That's when John Eliassen, beverages instructor at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Portland, introduced his small Willamette Valley label, La Bête, to the French market, largely through a series of interpersonal relationships. [Les Caves du Forum in Reims now carries five La Bête selections.](#)

But it wasn't entirely a matter of chance. Eliassen, a graduate of the Université de Bourgogne as well as the Lycée Viticole de Beaune, is well-schooled in French winemaking, which emphasizes minerality and acidity rather than fruit and oak.

Still, "It's bizarre," Eliassen reflects, that French oenophiles should enjoy sipping his Oregon-made wine. Both Eliassen and Lett describe it this way: "It's like bringing coals to Newcastle."

But maybe Newcastle is ready for a different kind of coal.

Winemaker Véronique Drouhin, who pours her Domaine Drouhin Oregon wines every spring at a show of French-owned overseas wineries, the Salon des Vignobles Français de l'Étranger in Paris, has noticed her French compatriots warming toward Oregon pinot noir.

"A few years ago, they did not even know Oregon was producing wines like this," says Drouhin. "Usually what they love is the texture, the mouth-feel. Some people even say, 'Wow, I kind of like this better than Burgundy!'"

The tables have turned

For decades, the Oregon wine industry has been peopled by Francophone winemakers and winery owners. Now, just within the past two years, the tables have turned. First, Evening Land Vineyards, an Ameri-French operation with a French winemaker and wineries and vineyards in Oregon and California, expanded into Burgundy in 2008.

In addition to its pinot noir, chardonnay and gamay noir from its Seven Springs Vineyard in Salem and Sonoma Coast pinot noirs, the venture now produces Evening Land wines in Burgundy's Côte d'Or. As of this year, in addition to the American market, Evening Land's French and Oregonian wines are stocked in French restaurants and wine shops.

Also in 2008, local vintner Scott Wright made his first wines in France. Wright, who imports wines from Burgundy in addition to producing his own Scott Paul Wines in Carlton, vinified a barrel of Chambolle-Musigny in 2008, which he will release only to U.S. customers in October; look for his 2009 Chambolle-Musigny and Meursault in late 2011.

French connections for Bastille Day

Wednesday is Bastille Day, the French equivalent of our July Fourth. Celebrate the occasion with one of the following Oregon wines with French connections. Both are gamay noir, a variety grown in Beaujolais and Burgundy that's similar to pinot noir and delicious lightly chilled.

2007 La Bête "Rebecca's Vineyard" Oregon Gamay Noir (\$17.50): In the Old-World style, this light-bodied red is unfiltered and fermented in neutral oak. Raspberries and floral perfume accent the nose; the tart raspberry-kiwi palate features zingy acidity, floral notes and delicate spice. At 12.5 percent alcohol by volume, this is a red to serve alongside salads and picnic lunches. Don't miss the fine print creeping up the side of the label: *Produit des Etats Unis*, it reads. Find it at Fred Meyer Gresham and Sunset; and at Whole Foods Markets Bridgeport, Fremont and Hollywood.

2008 Celebration Beaujolais-Villages (\$12): Evening Land Vineyards makes "Celebration" gamay noirs in both France and in Oregon; amazingly, the more-expensive Oregon bottling sells faster. Sourced from vines averaging 40 years of age in the Moulin-à-Vent region, this cherry-cranberry-and-spice-noted red was whole-cluster-fermented in concrete vats, then aged briefly in neutral barrels, in the traditional Beaujolais manner. Find it at City Market; Fred Meyer Hollywood West; Great Wine Buys; John's Market Place; Market of Choice West Linn; Pastaworks Hawthorne and Mississippi; and Whole Foods Market Hollywood.

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