

# Wine Spectator

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## Oregon's Natural Wonder

**The stars aligned in 2008 to give Willamette Valley vintners the raw materials for excellence**

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Every now and then a vintage comes along that can define a region. For Oregon, draw a big circle around 2008 and make a note: "As good as it gets." The Pinot Noirs from that year came out so consistently superb that I am rating the vintage a classic 97 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, the highest ever for this region. And, once all of the wines from the state's top producers are released and tasted, by around this time next year, the final rating for the vintage could be higher.

The year gave every vintner the raw materials to make his or her best wines, reflecting the pinnacle of what Oregon's climate and soils can do. In particular, it produced significantly more highly rated Pinot Noirs than any previous year, and the Chardonnays, Pinot Gris and other wines of the vintage are equally impressive. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

The majority of the Oregon Pinot Noirs currently on retail shelves or on offer by the wineries are from 2008. The wines are neither too big nor too lean or crisp. They have ripe flavors without any excess of other elements. And they have the kind of balance that suggests they will age magnificently.

Look for this trend toward elegantly balanced wines to continue in the 2009 and 2010 vintages, which also produced Pinots of moderate alcohol and good flavor.

In addition to Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley growers cultivate a few rows here and there of Gamay and make the occasional Syrah. Other parts of the state also show potential with Syrah, as well as with Bordeaux varieties and other red grapes such as Tempranillo.

Among white wines, Pinot Gris is the leader, mainly because Chardonnay has not delivered on its promise until recently. More vintners are beginning to get serious about Riesling and, in the warmer areas, Viognier.

The climate would seem to be ideal for sparkling wines, but so far only Argyle has managed to produce outstanding fizz consistently, including one of the best bubbliies in America, its Extended Tirage, bottled at 10 years of age.

### Why the 2008 Pinot Noirs are so Great

Pinot Noir fanatics originally came to Oregon because they believed its cool, wet climate could mimic Burgundy's more closely than California could. And 2008 was the year they finally made the wines they always dreamed of making.



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[Oregon Alphabetical Listing](#)

Like classic Pinots from anywhere, the 2008s from Oregon deliver intense, complex flavors of fruit, earth and spice, mixing sweet and savory elements, on light-bodied, refined structures. Few show high alcohol, or too much tannin, or too sharp acidity, or too much oak, or not enough. Across the board, the vintage defines finesse, delivering a huge range of aromatics and subtle nuances that shine through a relatively light framework; the wines have a remarkable sense of transparency.

Through the 1980s and '90s, Oregon Pinot Noirs often showed beautifully refined structures but could lack intensity. Several very warm vintages in this first decade of the 21st century made rich, intense wines, but many of these lacked the transparency. The best of both those worlds was achieved in 2008.

The cold, rainy 2007 vintage made some nice delicate wines, and at first 2008 seemed headed in that direction. A cold summer and rainy late September made everyone nervous. But the sun came out on Oct. 6, the not-yet-ripe grapes dried out, and the weather stayed moderate to warm for three weeks as growers picked at leisure.

"In 2008, as we got close to harvest it started to get scary," admits longtime Oregon vintner Ken Wright. "To be successful, we would have to be lucky. And we were."

The 2008 vintage shows what can happen in Oregon when everything comes out right. Alcohol levels in most wines range from 13 percent to 14 percent. Acidity levels are moderate. Tannins feel ripe. Flavors are ripe, but remain fresh and lively. Everything feels in balance. The tasting notes for the year's Pinots teem with words like silky, supple, glowing and, yes, finesse.

"I love the juiciness of the 2008s," says Dave Paige, winemaker at Adelsheim. "They need maybe five years to flesh out."

"We just waited [in 2008]," says seasoned grower Dick Shea, "and it was perfect."

#### **Late-Release '07 Pinots, Early Word on '09 and '10**

Although 2007 was a cold, rainy vintage, and the wines could be weak, there were doubtless some lovely wines made. Ten of the 46 Pinot Noirs from 2007 reviewed for this report earned ratings of 90 points or better, including the supple, polished Stoller Pinot Noir Dundee Hills SV Estate 2007 (92 points, \$40) and the pretty rose petal-accented Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Laurène 2007 (91, \$65).

As these wines suggest, the better winemakers found a deft balance in their wines. But the majority of 2007s turned out to be very light wines with more biting tannins than the flavors could balance. There are some good ones, but tread carefully.

The two vintages coming next show promise, each for different reasons. Bottom line, vintners are excited by what they have.

In many ways, 2009 was a mirror image of 2008; instead of a cool summer, several heat waves baked the region. But the heat came early enough that it did not shrivel ripe grapes. It only delayed maturation in the warmer sites when the heat shut down the vines, while cooler sites were able to keep ripening. This had the effect of compressing the harvest, which occurred after early September rains refreshed the vines. Yields were up significantly.

Tasted from barrel, the 2009s fall short of the extraordinary finesse and elegance of the 2008s, but their bold, ripe flavors come without the extra muscle that marred the most recent hot vintage, 2006. The first bottled 2009s to be released, tasted in late summer and fall, feel light and lively.

Despite off-and-on rain events in late September and early October, the early word on 2010 is positive. Yields are way down, which may be why so many Pinot Noir makers report rich color in fragrant fermentations. Expect to see the first wines next fall and winter.

### **A Few Words On Whites ...**

In most of the wine world, places known for Pinot Noir also excel at Chardonnay. Until recently this was not true of Oregon, and the state's vintners turned to Pinot Gris to make something distinctive.

New clones have made the difference for Chardonnay. Where the wines once had a welcome delicacy but lacked depth and purity of fruit flavor, the best now have the intensity and flavor that was missing before, without forgoing the charm. At the vanguard is Evening Land, with two extraordinary bottlings, but Domaine Serene and Bergström are right behind with Chardonnays of tremendous richness and verve. In all, a record 16 Chardonnays earned outstanding ratings this year.

Marked by fresh fruit flavors and dry balance, Oregon Pinot Gris is close on the heels of Chardonnay, and in the \$10 to \$25 range probably has more appeal.

Willamette Valley 2009s from Adelsheim (90, \$19) and Elk Cove (90, \$19) are widely available.

Viognier, primarily from Southern Oregon, can also be impressive, witness the polished and expressive Quady North Viognier Applegate Valley OX Block Mae's Vineyard 2009 (91, \$25).

*Editor at large Harvey Steiman is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Oregon.*

- [Harvey Steiman's Recommended Wines From Oregon \(in PDF Format\)](#)
- [Map of Oregon's Wine Regions \(in PDF Format\)](#)
- [How Pinot Noir Stacks Up in Oregon and Counting 90+ Wines in 90+ Years \(in PDF Format\)](#)

### **CASE STUDIES: '08S AT THREE PRICE POINTS**

#### **Big Blend: \$20**

##### **A to Z Pinot Noir Oregon 2008 (90 points, 62,954 cases)**

Economy of scale doesn't always work with a finicky grape such as Pinot Noir, but winemaker Sam Tannahill has a deft touch with the kind of delicate blending required to make thousands of cases of an affordable Pinot Noir that can hold its own with versions that cost two or three times as much. More than 30 different vineyards contributed to this wine, from every part of the state with Pinot vines. But instead of homogenizing the flavors, Tannahill emphasized distinctive high points of red berry and cherry flavor that balance immaculately with the fine structure.

#### **Single-Vineyard: \$38**

##### **Alexana Pinot Noir Dundee Hills 2008 (92 points, 1,200 cases)**

Cardiologist Madaiah Revana bought an 80-acre property in the heart of the Dundee Hills AVA and hired Lynn Penner-Ash to make the wine. To the 13 acres already planted, Revana added 38 more, aiming for complexity with nine different clones on more than a dozen different soil types. The site is just down the road from Bergström's estate vineyard. Always known for wines of suppleness and finesse, Penner-Ash crafted the 2008 to be smooth and refined, with earthy undertones adding depth to red berry and peppery spice flavors, finishing long, with juicy acidity. It can age.

#### **Terroir Within a Vineyard: \$65**

##### **Evening Land Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Seven Springs Vineyard La Source 2008 (96 points, 310 cases)**

When Evening Land acquired the rights to the 100-acre Seven Springs Vineyard, winemaker Isabelle Meunier and

consulting winemaker Dominique Lafon set out to map the site's soil structure. They discovered a section at the heart of the vineyard with a particularly rocky base. Vinifying it separately, they were delighted with the wine's distinctive minerality, refinement, subtlety and length. The wine feels more noble and has a different flavor profile than the rest of the vineyard and is a stunning example of a special terroir.

## **BEYOND WILLAMETTE: OREGON'S WARMER CLIMES**

Parts of Oregon outside Willamette Valley also grow Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris, and many of the large-scale Oregon appellation bottlings blend in fruit from the Umpqua, Rogue and Applegate valleys of Southern Oregon.

Columbia Gorge and Columbia Valley, regions that overlap into central Washington, grow some Pinot Noir, too, but the best wine in this report from that part of the world is a white-the silky, charming Phelps Creek Chardonnay Columbia Gorge 2008 (90, \$26).

Few of the state's warm-region wines rate among the top bottlings, however. Southern Oregon specializes in Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and a few intrepid souls there pursue Viognier, Albariño and Tempranillo.

Del Rio Vineyard in Rogue Valley earned a reputation for growing outstanding Syrah for others, and recently has begun bottling its own wines as well. Its 2007 and 2008 Syrahs earned 91 and 89 points, respectively. Del Rio's Claret 2007, Ancient Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 and the Griffin Creek Syrah 2007, all from Rogue Valley, also reached 90 points.

Over in the northeastern corner of the state, the Oregon side of the Walla Walla Valley AVA can produce outstanding big reds that can legitimately be bottled as Oregon-grown wines. In practice, however, most Oregon wineries look to southern Oregon vineyards for fruit.

## **5 NEW NAMES TO KNOW**

### **LENNÉ**

90 Pinot Noir Willamette Valley LeNez 2008 \$30 396 cases

90 Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District 2008 \$45 401 cases

In 2000, Steve and Karen Lutz found what they thought would be an ideal site for Pinot Noir. It was in a great neighborhood, a hilly tract across the road from WillaKenzie Estate, with good southern exposure. They planted a few acres in 2001 but lost most of the vines in the heat of 2003, one of the sultriest summers on record in Willamette Valley.

They replanted and now, with 14.5 acres under vine, the 2008 vintage brings them a couple of winners, all from estate fruit. Lenné Estate is a barrel selection and tends to show darker, spicier flavors than LeNez, a general cross-section of the vineyard that aims more for lightness and red fruit. The wines are made at Owen Roe, with that winery's winemaker, Erik Brasher, consulting.

### **LONGPLAY**

91 Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains Lia's Vineyard 2008 \$24 287 cases

Six years ago, Todd Hansen was part of the U.S. trade mission to the European Union in Brussels. Planning a family, he and his wife, Sunky Kim, decided they needed to settle down somewhere. Bitten by the wine bug while serving in the American diplomatic corps in France, Chile and South Africa, the Seattle-born Hansen looked for a vineyard from Walla Walla to Napa Valley. When Rex Hill decided to sell off 50 acres of its Jacob-Hart Vineyard, Hansen pounced.

He sells grapes to wineries such as Penner-Ash and Bergström, but keeps a few tons for his own brand. Former

Rex Hill winemaker Aron Hess, who now runs the custom-crush 12th and Maple facility (where a number of Oregon's top new-wave Pinot Noirs are made), makes the wine. The winery name, Hess likes to say, suggests the goal: to make "analog wine in a digital world."

The 2008 vintage, their second, came out pretty groovy, especially for its supple texture and lovely red fruit flavors. Production increased significantly in 2009.

### **PURPLE HANDS**

92 Pinot Noir Dundee Hills PH Holstein Vineyards 2008 \$40 100 cases

Cody Wright divides his time between his job as assistant winemaker at ROCO winery and his own brand, Purple Hands, a crush-time phenomenon that as a winemaker he knows a little about. The label suggests an unpretentious wine that's fun to drink, and the lower-priced Oregon bottling, a Merlot blend (2008: 88, \$20), certainly makes good on that. The single-vineyard wine from Holstein Vineyards takes it up a few notches.

Wright grew up hanging around wineries. His father is Ken Wright. His stepfather, Rollin Soles, runs Argyle Winery. His mother, Corby Stonebraker-Soles, now married to Soles, is a partner in ROCO. All in the family.

### **ZIMRI**

90 Pinot Noir Dundee Hills La Colina Vineyard 2007 \$25 250 cases

Jason Bull oversees the vineyards and makes the wines at David Hill Winery, but on his own he buys a few tons of grapes and makes his Zimri label, so named because Bull lives on Zimri Road on the outskirts of Newberg. "My dream is to someday turn our barn into a winery," he says. "I've been making wine for other people for 20 years."

After a series of assistant winemaker jobs at high-profile California wineries, he landed in Oregon at Laurel Ridge, later joining David Hill, in 2005. He has no thoughts of planting a vineyard, though. "With the glut of grapes, buying a vineyard might not be my best move," he says. Not when he can make light, cinnamon-accented Pinots like this 2007 from vineyards such as La Colina.

### **Z'IVO**

93 Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills 2008 \$36 1,000 cases

91 Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills 2006 \$35 1,600 cases

Portland surgeon Johnny Zelko named his 40-acre vineyard Z'ivo to celebrate his Slovak heritage. The name means "Z's wine," and for the first several vintages that was literally true—the small production wasn't sold widely. But Z'ivo is catching up fast, and is now more widely available.

After working a few vintages in friends' wineries, Zelko took the plunge in 1995, buying a rocky piece of land on the northeastern edge of the Eola-Amity Hills AVA. Mineral notes are definitely present in the flavor profile, the fruit character veering toward dark plum and blueberry. The wines are made at WineWorks in McMinnville, under the watchful eye of Miguel Lopez, the winemaker there.