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AND THE WINNER IS ... A LOOK AT THE

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A LOOK AT OREGON WINES

Willamette Whites Offer Eye-Opening Satisfaction

By **DAVID NERSHI, CSW**

@vinosphere

Are you in love with Willamette Valley like I am? If so, it's for a good reason. The Willamette Valley, Oregon's leading wine region, has two-thirds of the state's wineries and vineyards and is home to more than 700 wineries. It is recognized as one of the premier Pinot Noir-producing areas globally.

Everyone knows about Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, but the times are changing. In fact, 30 percent of Willamette Valley's grapes are those other than Pinot Noir. The quality of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Riesling and lesser-known white grapes capture the attention of wine critics with their balance, elegance and higher acidity.

We tasted six Willamette whites from premier wineries. To round out the picture, we contacted three Willamette Valley winemakers to get their perspectives on the rise of white wines in the region.

Youngberg Hill is a 50-acre estate with 20 acres of sustainably farmed vineyards in Willamette Valley. Proprietor/winegrower Wayne Bailey and his family are the modern-day stewards of a property that has been a family farm since the 1850s. The first vines were planted on the McMinnville property in 1989. The estate is among the Willamette Valley's westernmost vineyards and



DAVID NERSHI

Aaron Lieberman is the winemaker at Iris Vineyards.



DAVID NERSHI

Dave Specter is the owner and winemaker at Bells Up Winery in Oregon.

experiences significant maritime influence.

"Our white program includes Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, and sparkling wine," said Bailey. "However, our focus is on Chardonnay. I believe, like Pinot Noir, Chardonnay is best grown in cooler climates and reflects where and when it's grown. My goal is for the Willamette Valley to be known just as much for its Chardonnay as for its Pinot Noir. And when that happens, you will finally see Willamette Valley Chardonnays on retail shelves and restaurants across the country."

Dave Specter is the owner and winemaker at Bells Up Winery, a micro-boutique winery he operates with his wife, Sara. Specter is a former corporate tax attorney who won two national amateur winemaking competitions, encouraging the couple to purchase a former Christmas tree farm north of Newberg, Oregon, and establish their vineyard. Today the winery produces about 600 cases annually.

"Regionally, and broadly speaking, there is a tendency toward producing crisper, balanced white wines that showcase the minerality of the area's soils," said Specter. "You don't see many oaked whites made here compared to other winemaking regions, which makes them distinctive.

"For whites, I'm trying to achieve approachability and elegance through balanced acidity with a creamy texture that comes from a few months spent stirring the wine on its lees. That gives them a fuller-bodied presence, allowing our white wines to be enjoyed solo or accompanied by a meal. We've seen great pairings with oysters or creamy Mediterranean lamb stew for the Rhapsody Pinot Blanc, and fish tacos or asparagus with lemon for the Helios Seyval Blanc, which is the only planting of that varietal in the Willamette Valley (thereby making it a very unique white here)."

Iris Vineyards is a family-owned estate winery in the foothills of the Oregon Coast mountain range in southern Willamette Valley. It's located on an 870-acre estate, with almost 50 acres of vineyard framed by restored woodlands. Winemaker Aaron Lieberman's philosophy is to create bright, fruit-forward wines that honor their source with crisp acidity and low alcohol. Lieberman is approaching his 13th vintage as winemaker for Iris Vineyards.

"There are white wines produced in other parts of the world that are very similar to Willamette Valley wines," said Lieberman. "For some white wines produced here, the combination of the climate and soils derived from volcanic

ON BLIND FAITH



TRIANGLE AROUND TOWN

Gloria and Stephen Reustle of Oregon's Reustle Prayer Rock Vineyards.

From marketing to winemaking, Oregon duo find wine success

For Stephen and Gloria Reustle, the jump into the wine world originally stemmed from a successful marketing company. Providing top-notch products to a loyal fan base and moving to Oregon's Umpqua Valley eventually led to the couple growing 40 acres of vines within their 200-acre estate.

According to Reustle, each grape varietal, clone and rootstock were carefully selected to match the microclimates on the property. And only using fruit grown on the estate, Reustle Prayer Rock Vineyards is producing some of the finest wines in Oregon.

Take, for example, the winery's Grüner Veltliner. When Reustle produced the first vintage of Grüner back in 2005, it was the first winery in the U.S. to make a Grüner Veltliner.

"I was in Austria on a motorcycle tour of the Alps in the 1990s and went into an expensive restaurant," Reustle says. "I asked the waiter to bring out what he thought was the best example of Austrian white wine, and he brought out a Grüner Veltliner."

Never forgetting that wine, years later, Reustle consulted with Greg Jones, a climatologist with Southern Oregon University. They discovered that the soil inside the Umpqua Valley was suitable for growing Grüner Veltliner.

"From the very first vintage, I was immediately impressed with the fruit and crisp acidity of the Austrian varietal and have been overwhelmed by the positive response from International Wine Competitions," he says.

Since 2007 Reustle's Grüner vintages have won a total of 25 awards, which includes recently a double gold "best in class" at the 2021 Great NW Invitational Wine Competition and a "best of show

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parent material does make these wines unique.

"My focus for the Willamette Valley Pinot Gris is to respect the varietal (varietal character) and end up with a balanced, easy-to-drink wine. Cultural practices in the vineyard, picking decisions, and grape handling in the winery all contribute to this," he says. "All of the above applies to the Blanc de Noirs and Sweet Amalia. An additional focus for the Bdn is persistence and quality of mousse (foam). Additionally, for Sweet Amalia, we strive to create a product that appeals to tasting room visitors and club members who demand a sweet wine. At the same time, I want this wine to have a complex flavor profile and to improve with age."

While the Willamette Valley's reputation for white wine was previously built on Pinot Gris, the cool climate and unique soils that bring forth stand-out Pinot Noir are also ideal for another Burgundian grape: Chardonnay.

We were also impressed with the range of whites reviewed, from Pinot Blanc to a sparkling Blanc de Noir and a Seyval Blanc and Pinot Gris, delivered in a dry and sweet style.

ARETÉ 2019 BRUT BLANC DE NOIRS

Areté is the premium range of wines from Iris. This wine is 100 percent Pinot Noir but delivered in a "blanc" style. We began our tasting event with this wine, and the foamy perlage delighted the crowd. Wonderful crisp grapefruit notes mingled with lemon and peach. The wine features small and refined bubbles. \$33.99.

BELLS UP RHAPSODY 2021 PINOT BLANC

This wine immediately gained fan-favorite status with our group. I was expecting a more austere wine, but the Rhapsody (named for Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue) delivered nectarine and lemon zest flavors in a jazzy way. The wine gets six months of sur lie aging for a fuller body without dampening the crispness. \$32.

BELLS UP HELIOS 2021 SEYVAL BLANC, CHEHALEM MOUNTAINS



PHOTO C/O YOUNGBERG HILL

Wayne Bailey is the winegrower and proprietor at Youngberg Hill.

Bells Up has the first and only Seyval Blanc planting in Willamette Valley (second in Oregon). The variety is found mainly in the Midwest and East. Tropical fruit and green apples surround a swirling minerality. There is a unique flinty twang on the finish. Minimal availability of 64 cases. \$40.

YOUNGBERG HILL 2021 ASPEN PINOT GRIS

Named after the winemaker's youngest daughter, this Pinot Gris has a pleasing fruitiness perfect to pair with spicy food. Juicy apricot and floral notes mingle with tropical fruit flavors and mineral tones. This is classic Willamette Valley Pinot Gris! \$35

IRIS 2020 PINOT GRIS

Bright citrus flavors wrapped in juicy pear. Whole-cluster pressed for additional depth of flavor. This is an easy-to-love wine with a refreshing juiciness, and the acidity adds to the structure and balance. \$15.99.

IRIS 2019 SWEET AMELIA PINOT GRIS

This was one of the big surprises of our tasting. I've never heard of a dessert wine Pinot Gris, let alone tasted one. We had two guests who refused to leave without taking what was left in the bottle. This is a delicate wine, not viscous or sticky. There are touches of honey and orange marmalade. Even with the sweetness, it maintains balance and a crisp finish. \$18.99.



Dave Nershi is the publisher of the *Vino-Sphere* wine blog. A former newspaper and magazine editor, Nershi is an award-winning writer focusing on wines, wineries, and related travel.