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## Stories of Passion and Pinot: Bells Up Winery

May 31, 2019

Do you know by any chance what “bells up” means? If you do, you can already pat yourself on the back and pour yourself a glass of wine. If you don’t – you can pour yourself a glass of wine and ponder at the question for a bit – the answer will follow.

Meanwhile, let’s talk about the passion, an indelible component of winemaking, possibly even a key ingredient in a delicious wine.

Dave Specter started making wine in the basement of his home back in 2006. By 2009, he realized that passion for winemaking trumpets his (successful!) career of a corporate tax attorney, and Dave decided to let his passion lead the way. In 2012, Dave and his wife Sara found themselves in Newberg, Oregon, purchasing a dead Christmas tree farm in the Chehalem Mountains AVA, where they started planting their estate vineyard. The rest is history – of passion and Pinot, there is.



Bells Up vineyards. Source: Bells Up Winery

Before there was wine, there was music. For more than 20 years Dave had been playing the French horn. In classical music, there is always a moment which needs to be stressed – “Bells up” is the conductor’s instruction to the French horn players to lift the bells of their instruments and produce the sound of maximum intensity. “Bells up” became Dave’s motto in life, and it also gave the name to his winery – now you have your answer in case you are still wondering.

While Pinot Noir was the first grape planted at the newly minted Bells Up winery, the passion also led Dave to plant half an acre of Seyval Blanc, the grape he successfully used back in Ohio. That Seyval Blanc planting became the first in the Chehalem Mountains AVA, and second in Oregon. If you look at [Bells Up winery website](#), you will see that the winery bills itself as micro-boutique and un-domaine – planting Seyval Blanc and not Pinot Gris in Oregon is clearly an un-domaine move. By the way, the “un-domaine” was one of the words which caught my eye while researching the Bells Up winery information. So I took the opportunity to sit down (virtually, albeit) with Dave and listen to him share his passion for wine. Here is what transpired in our conversation:

***[TaV]: What kind of wine(s) did you make in your basement in Cincinnati?***

[DS]: In the beginning, when my wife Sara and I started making wine in 2006 as a couple’s activity for our fifth wedding anniversary, we started with kit wines—juice in a bag, essentially. When I moved on to grapes, I sourced from both local and regional vineyards for Seyval Blanc, as well as through a Cincinnati vintners club that would truck in fruit from vineyards in California. From that I made Syrah, Petit Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot—even a Pinot Noir, although that fruit was sourced from Lodi, and was completely unlike the Pinot I work within Oregon today. Essentially, it was a hobby that grew out of control.

***[TaV]: Why Oregon? As a young winemaker, you had many options – what made you decide to go to Oregon?***

[DS]: First, thank you for calling me young. We were a whole lot younger when we started this journey. After that first kit wine, I was hooked on the process and wanted to learn more. Sara graciously let me take over the basement, then the garage, then the dining room. And we started taking wine vacations to “hidden gem” wine regions—Texas Hill Country, Finger Lakes, and finally Oregon in 2008.

We had already visited Oregon briefly in 2004 and loved it. In 2008 we spent two weeks roaming the state, with the last few days in Newberg at a bed and breakfast just 400 feet up the mountain from the property that is now ours. We fell in love with Oregon, the scenery, the climate, the wines, and the intimate experiences tasting wines at the tiniest wineries with the winemaker. We decided then that this was the place for us.

***[TaV]: Seyval Blanc is one of the most popular grapes in the Eastern US. But why Seyval Blanc in Oregon?***

[DS]: When we moved to Oregon in 2012, we knew we wanted to plant a vine that connected to our story. I’d been working with Seyval Blanc for years in Ohio and when I won two amateur national winemaking competitions in 2011, one was with a 2010 Seyval Blanc. So, it was a great tie-in.

But also, we see an opportunity to differentiate ourselves with a white wine that nobody else has in the Willamette Valley—and only one other winery has in Oregon. Plus, we believed it would grow well here, and after two small harvests that resulted in some beautiful wine, we’re happy to be proven right. Note, however, we didn’t plant a lot of it: only about 250 vines (and not all of them made it—so Sara’s been propagating like crazy ever since for replants). We figured if it was a failure, we could always graft over it.

***[TaV]: Any future plans for more mainstream Oregon white grapes – Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Riesling?***

[DS]: From a business perspective, we've taken a really close look at what other wineries in the area are making, and for a 500-ish case production winery like ours it's best to have just one white wine available for sale at a given time. That's because we don't move enough volume and the whites generally don't age as long as reds.

We currently make Pinot Blanc and we like it quite a bit. It's a bit rarer in these parts than Pinot Gris or Chardonnay, which again helps to differentiate us. But as for expanding our white wine program, the ultimate plan is to phase out Pinot Blanc for Seyval Blanc and that will be the only white in our line-up. There are a lot of similarities between my Pinot Blanc and my Seyval Blanc, so the transition from one to the other won't be as jarring as a shift from another white varietal, such as Chardonnay.

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Bells Up wines. Source: Bells Up winery

***[TaV]: Today you already make white, rosé, and red. Any plans to join seemingly the hottest Oregon trend and start producing sparkling wine?***

[DS]: No. I know I keep coming back to the numbers, but I'm a finance guy with an MBA and a corporate tax law career. While we think there's a place in the market for adding bubbles to still wines, if I made a sparkling wine I'd want to do it the right way (traditional method). That takes time, space and money. And at our volumes, what we'd have to charge per bottle to justify that type of investment is more than what the market would reasonably bear.

***[TaV]: Continuing the same question – as you already produce Seyval Blanc, which makes very good dessert wines, any plans for some Late Harvest Seyval Blanc goodness?***

[DS]: Don't give Sara any ideas! Actually, we've been so focused on just getting these Seyval Blanc vines established and proving that our concept had legs that we really haven't thought much farther than straight up Seyval Blanc. Our 2017 harvest yielded 100 pounds and made 23 bottles (yes, bottles)! Our 700-pound 2018 harvest produced 15 cases and we've made that available exclusively to our wine club members on a 2-bottle allocation. Give me a few years when I've got Seyval Blanc growing out of my ears and I'll get back to you on a Late Harvest version.

***[TaV]: Who are your winemaking mentors (if any)?***

[DS]: First and foremost, Joe Henke of Henke Winery in Cincinnati. Joe took me under his wing as a basement winemaking hobbyist. He offered me a position as an unpaid cellar rat but promised he'd teach me everything he knew—open book—and he did. He even showed me his books because he wanted me to understand what he called “the good, the bad and the ugly of being a professional winemaker.” He's an award-winning winemaker who makes 2,000 cases across roughly 15 different types of wines (including a phenomenal sparkling Chardonnay and an incredible Norton) in the basement of a 100-year-old house in an urban neighborhood with the bare essentials: barrels, a pump, a press, a pallet jack. I learned so much from him about the process of winemaking and the business of winemaking; that you don't need a bunch of expensive equipment to make incredible wines. You just need to do a ton of cleaning. Amazing mentor.

Additionally, I did a harvest internship in the Fall of 2012 at Alexana in Dundee, Oregon under Bryan Weil. It was Bryan's first harvest there as winemaker and Lynn Penner-Ash of Penner-Ash Wine Cellars was still working alongside Bryan, as she had been consulting winemaker for the label prior to Bryan coming on board. I soaked up as much as I could about working with Pinot Noir from both of them. Because, at age 39, I was not your typical harvest intern—plus I had three years of time at Henke Winery under my belt—Bryan was gracious enough to build my internship around what I needed to learn. He put me in the vineyard for sampling fruit, for example, something I'd never had the opportunity to do before. He had me set up the lab for him and run lots of testing because I knew how to do it. We're still very close today and I appreciate everything he was gracious enough to share with me.

As far as winery business mentors, there have been so many people in the Willamette Valley who have generously offered advice and shared their successes and failures that it would be impossible to name them all. But they know who they are.

***[TaV]: What is your view on sustainable viticulture, dry farming, organic methods?***

[DS]: That's what we do here in our own vineyard and at the vineyards we source from. We think it's very important to be good stewards of the Earth—we're farmers now! It also produces stronger vines that develop more flavorful grapes and ultimately better wines.

***[TaV]: How did you choose the music pieces as the names of your wines? What was your thought process, what criteria? What message are you trying to convey with those names?***

[DS]: Let me start by explaining the name of the winery. I played French Horn for more than 20 years (I'm horribly out of practice now—Sara says I only make noise) including after business and law schools, so it was a key part of my life. When it came time to name the winery, we wanted to name it something personal that wasn't our last name (people are terrible at remembering names!) and I really wanted to tie it into the French Horn.

Coincidentally, the property Sara found was on Bell Road in Newberg. So that tied in perfectly to the term “Bells Up,” which is a notation by the composer in the score of a piece of music. At a dramatic moment, it directs the French Horns to lift the bells of their instruments to project their sound with more intensity. It's our time to shine—which is why I say the winery is my #bellsupmoment.

The pieces of music I chose to name each wine are all ones that prominently feature the French Horn, as well as epitomize the wine itself. George Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue” inspired our Pinot Blanc to be named “Rhapsody” because it's a jazzy, energetic white wine. Gustav Mahler—the French Horn player's best friend because his pieces tend to be horn-heavy—wrote his Symphony No. 1 in D Major, called “Titan,” and it's become regarded as his flagship work. Therefore, our Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, which we consider to be our flagship Pinot, is “Titan.” And so on. There's a link at the top of our wines page to a playlist of all the pieces for those interested in hearing them.

***[TaV]: Why “un-domaine”?***

[DS]: It was a term that came up as we were discussing how to describe our casual tasting room vibe, our keep-it-simple winemaking approach, and our distinctive brand with a good friend who happens to be a wine writer. A couple of years ago after we opened our doors in 2015 there was a trend of new wineries opening in the Willamette Valley with the word “Domaine” in their name. We just aren't. Our property is humble, our tasting room is a converted pole barn, you won't find a marble fireplace. While Sara and I enjoy wine, nobody would ever confuse us with wine snobs.

Does “un-domaine” mean we're not for everyone? Absolutely. There's no cachet associated with owning or drinking a bottle of Bells Up wine. And that's perfectly fine with us. We'd much rather be the bottle on your table every day of the week than the one gathering dust in the wine rack because you spent a ton of money on it and are waiting for a special occasion—and friends who will appreciate it—before it's opened.

***[TaV]: Did you have a pivotal wine in your life, the one which changed your wine worldview?***

[DS]: Not so much a specific wine but a wine experience I had very early on. I had the pleasure of visiting some friends in Europe after graduating from law school and they took me to Beaune (in the heart of Burgundy) for a weekend. We did a lot of tasting in the touristy cellars, but also in garages and co-operatives where the atmosphere was much more down-to-earth. I knew absolutely nothing about wine prior to that but I was in awe of what I saw, smelled, and tasted. I couldn't put my finger on it at the time, but I was in the heart of a culture that valued wine as an everyday experience—that part really resonated with my soul. Looking back, I'm sure that I would appreciate that experience more fully if I took the same trip now, but that time in Beaune has fueled my passion for wine ever since.

***[TaV]: With the exception of your own wines, what are your favorite Oregon wines and /or producers?***

[DS]: We truly have an embarrassment of riches here in the Willamette Valley—so many quality producers call this place home that a list of my favorite producers would fill about 3 dozen barrels. With every producer having their own unique style—plus the trailblazing nature of the Oregon wine industry—innovation is happening all the time: new grapes, new techniques, and so on. I think many people assume that a winemaker drinks only his or her own wine at home, but the truth is I almost never drink my own wines outside of the professional setting. I'd much rather be exploring the styles and fresh ideas that other winemakers here are creating and perhaps get inspired to try some of those ideas myself!

***[TaV]: What are your favorite wines and/producers outside of Oregon?***

[DS]: Again, way too many to answer! The wines I enjoy most are ones where I have a personal connection in some way and I'm fortunate to have so many talented friends in other parts of the winemaking world. Back in Ohio, my mentor Joe Henke at Henke Winery, of course, but also my friends Greg Pollman of Valley Vineyards and Bill Skvarla of Harmony Hill Vineyards make fantastic wines from grapes grown locally and regionally. Up in Woodinville, Washington my friend, Lisa Callan of Callan Cellars is making a name for herself with her Washington-focused program. And up over the border in Naramata, British Columbia my friend Jay Drysdale has founded Bella Sparkling Wines, BC's only winery dedicated to sparkling wines. I know that some other friends have projects in the works and can't wait to brag about them in a few years too.

***[TaV]: Where do you see Bells Up Winery in 20 years?***

[DS]: Not in the grocery store. Our customer base is national, but we have no aspirations for retail distribution. We're perfectly content to sell direct-to-consumer and to a couple of local restaurants and a wine bar in Downtown Portland. When we hit 1,000-case production, that's it. We won't make any more than that annually because we both enjoy and believe wholeheartedly in the micro-boutique winery experience we've created. We want to have personal relationships with our customers. We specifically don't have an online ordering portal because we want to have a conversation with our buyers either by phone or email. Making and maintaining those connections is really important to us, and we hope to grow those relationships over the next 20 years and beyond.



I'm sure you are ready to taste some wine by now. Before I will share with you my notes after tasting 3 of Dave's wines, I want to bring something to your attention. By now you know that Bells Up wines are named after different musical compositions. In case you want to experience those musical compositions, either by themselves or together with the wine, Dave has a [link to Spotify playlist](#) of all the relevant music pieces available on the winery website. And now, here are my notes:

**2018 Bells Up Helios Seyval Blanc Chehalem Mountains AVA** (13.1% ABV, \$38, 15 cases produced)  
Light golden

Restrained, minerality-driven, touch of gunflint, a touch of fresh green apples  
Excellent acidity, Granny Smith apples all the way, crisp, fresh, good texture. Has traits of Seyval Blanc (tropical fruit intent, I would say, like a hint of guava without any fruit notes), but put on a different core 8-, very interesting, thought-provoking and food friendly wine (acidity lingers on the finish for a good couple of minutes)

**2018 Bells Up Prelude Rosé of Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains** (13% ABV, \$22, 126 cases produced) Light red

Medium plus intensity, distant hint of the barnyard, underripe cranberries, herbal notes  
Bone dry, crunchy cranberries, excellent acidity, food-friendly wine, fruit showing up a bit later, excellent balance 8/8+, delicious and dangerous. I can keep drinking it until the bottle will be empty

**2016 Bells Up Titan Pinot Noir Willamette Valley** (13.1% ABV, \$40, 12 months in French oak (39% new), 131 cases produced)

Dark ruby

Plums, a hint of smoke, violets

Slightly underripe plums, crisp cherries, sage undertones, good acidity, light to medium body, 8-, light, easy to drink, food friendly. Should improve with time.



Dave Specter conducts the private tasting. Source: Bells Up Winery

Here you are, my friends. Another story of Passion and Pinot.

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