

# OREGON CHARDONNAY: FRONTIER FLAVOURS

That it's such a draw for so many Burgundians of note is sufficient to tell you that Oregon's Willamette Valley is a developing wine region to be followed, and still a land of discovery.

**Charles Curtis MW** highlights his pick of the producers, along with 12 great wines to try

Once reviled, Chardonnay is today the secret weapon in Oregon's winemaking arsenal. Wine lovers searching for a crisp, fresh white that can age have traditionally turned to Burgundy. But with the popularity of white Burgundy exploding and prices soaring (especially with the effect of tariffs in the US), many are looking at

alternatives. And Oregon might just fit the bill. Although the Willamette Valley is nearly halfway around the world from Burgundy, there are striking similarities. One in particular: wines made from Chardonnay in both places can be shockingly good.

## *Similar but different*

The fundamental reasons for the association owe more to chance than to geology. Robert Drouhin was an early convert. In the 1970s, the then-head of Maison Joseph Drouhin in Burgundy had been introduced to Oregon wine and organised a comparative tasting in Burgundy. By 1986 he had convinced his newly graduated daughter Véronique to intern in

Oregon. They organised internships at Bethel Heights, The Eyrie Vineyards and Adelsheim. These wineries were among the pioneers of the Oregon wine industry. In 1970, there were only five commercial wineries in the state; today there are more than 700. It was Adelsheim that alerted Robert Drouhin to the availability of the vineyard site in Dundee Hills that in 1987 became Domaine Drouhin Oregon.

Véronique Drouhin is quick to point out both similarities and differences between her native Burgundy and Oregon: 'It's a cool climate – that is the reason we went to Oregon – but the volcanic soil is so different.' For her, it was an experience of discovery. The initial Drouhin estate was in the Dundee Hills AVA on a type of volcanic soil called Jory. Early Oregon vintners prized the Jory soils, which gave a distinctive elegance to the wines. 'But I wouldn't say minerality,' remarks Drouhin. 'That belongs to Chablis.'

For the next Drouhin project, called Roserock, Drouhin acquired land in Eola-Amity Hills AVA, just to the east of a break in the Coast Range known as the Van Duzer Corridor. The soils are shallower, but they are also complex – in addition to Jory, there are Nekia soils, a mixture of marine sedimentary and alluvial material. Unlike the Dundee Hills, it is open to the cooling influence of the Pacific ocean through that gap in the mountains. This combination of soil and climate provides a perfect terroir for growing Chardonnay.

**Domaine Drouhin estate vineyards and winery in the Dundee Hills AVA**

‘Although the Willamette Valley is nearly halfway around the world from Burgundy, there are striking similarities’

## *Personal connections*

One touchstone for Chardonnay here is the Seven Springs Vineyard, planted in 1984 by Al MacDonald. In 2007, ownership passed to a group that included Hollywood director Mark Tarlov, restaurateur Danny Meyer and Burgundy's Domaine Jacques Prieur. This team formed the winery Evening Land, run today by sommelier Rajat Parr and winemaker Sashi Moorman. Parr believes in the site. 'I said to Sashi: "This is the hill of Corton – we have to plant this whole hill to Chardonnay".' Evening Land makes three Chardonnays here. One is blended from blocks throughout the vineyard, and two are site-specific to a particular vein of volcanic soil.

Dominique Lafon of Meursault was also quick to recognise the potential. He began to consult for Evening Land in 2007. He explains that at that time, producers of Chardonnay looked for very ripe fruit. Dissatisfied with >



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Domaine Serene



Above from left: Dominique Lafon, Thomas Savre and Larry Stone MS head the team at Lingua Franca

the wines, he pushed his reluctant owners to pick earlier. When he harvested Chardonnay as he liked, Lafon found the results surprisingly good: 'I said, oh my God, this is amazing! This has tension, this has balance, this is fresh, this is pure – this is incredible!' Master Sommelier Larry Stone managed Evening Land during Lafon's consultancy. He left when he had the opportunity to purchase the property across the street, and began to plant grapes intending to sell the fruit. Lafon joined him as consultant in 2015, convincing Stone to launch a winery to vinify the fruit himself. Their joint project, called Lingua Franca, was born. Lafon is pleased with the results, which he finds very close to Burgundy. 'We have the same type of pH we have in Burgundy, even more so for Chardonnay than for Pinot Noir,' he says.

Lafon also encouraged Jean-Nicolas Méo to begin a West Coast adventure of his own. In 2012 Méo was approached by LA record executive Jay Boberg about a project in



Map: Maggie Nelson



Oregon. Two years later, they produced their first vintage under the Nicolas-Jay label (see 'Producer profile', April 2020 issue). At first they planned to buy grapes, but a vineyard came up that was too good to pass up: Bishop Creek. ➤

Above: Isabelle Meunier and co-founder Greg Ralston at Lavinea

## Oregon: 10 names to know

### OO WINES

Wine-loving lawyer Chris Hermann decided to produce Chardonnay in 2015, founded Double Zero with his father, a professor at Oregon State University, and hired Burgundy-based consultant Pierre Millemann to create a range of wines. The flagship VGW (Very Good White) has the largest production at about 1,000 cases. The EGW (Extra Good White) uses some old-vine fruit, and the superb Freya Hermann Cuvée is a single-vineyard wine from Seven Springs Vineyard. The style of the wines is slightly reductive and generously wooded, reminding many of the wines of Coche-Dury.

### ANTICA TERRA

Winemaker Maggie Harrison, formerly of Sine Qua Non, takes the lead on this Oregon project. She uses Chardonnay sourced from the Shea Vineyard and four other sources to create a luxurious, exuberant style. She makes a strict selection of the fully ripe fruit, presses gently and carefully ferments in cask, through full malolactic and generous ageing. The top wine, Aequorin (pictured right), is rare but worth the search.

### BERGSTROM

Oregon local Josh Bergström completed wine studies in Beaune before returning to establish a vineyard with his family. Today they own nearly 30ha of vineyards in the Ribbon Ridge, Chehalem Mountains and Dundee Hills AVAs, all biodynamically farmed. There is no sulphur used in the winery and very little new wood. The style is pure, clean and fresh.

### DOMAINE DROUHIN

Véronique Drouhin was one of the original Burgundian pioneers of the Willamette Valley, arriving in 1986. She still makes the wines and her brother Philippe manages the vineyards, which include more than 50ha, all certified as sustainably farmed. The fruit is whole-cluster pressed and gently fermented, half in cask and half in tank. For the Domaine Drouhin bottling, the malolactic fermentation is blocked for the tank-fermented portion so that the wine retains a vibrant freshness.



Bergström



Antica Terra

### DOMAINE SERENE

This renowned Pinot Noir producer launched its lauded Chardonnay programme with the purchase of the Côte Sud vineyard in Dundee Hills in 1997. Now it has nearly 30ha planted to the grape. The wines are produced in a dedicated gravity-flow winery and include five single-vineyard Chardonnays and two wines blended across different vineyards.

### EVENING LAND

Initially planted in 1984 with own-rooted vines, Evening Land has been considerably retooled by sommelier Rajat Parr, winemaker Sashi Moorman and their partners. The Chardonnay from their iconic Seven Springs Vineyard is a reference throughout the state. Their two single-parcel bottlings called La Source and Summum are as close to the concept of lieu-dit as you will get in Oregon.

### LAVINEA

Quebec-native winemaker Isabelle Meunier worked with Pascal Marchand at Domaine de la Vougeraie and Dominique Lafon at Evening Land, from where she left to found Lavinea in 2014. Continuing

to work close to the Burgundian model, she produces a Chardonnay from Elton Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills and another from Lazy River in Yamhill-Carlton.

### LINGUA FRANCA

Master Sommelier Larry Stone has set up shop across the street from Evening Land in Eola-Amity Hills. The Janzen Ranch that he bought in 2012 is adjacent to the Seven Springs Vineyard and shares a similar terroir. Dominique Lafon joined as the consulting winemaker in 2015, with Thomas Savre working alongside him locally. The wines are crisp, precise and as thrilling as anything in the region.

### NICOLAS-JAY

The Oregon collaboration between Jean-Nicolas Méo of Vosne-Romanée and music industry executive Jay Boberg. With local winemaker Tracy Kendall they produce two Chardonnays, including the single-vineyard, estate-grown wine from Bishop Creek – their vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton. Nicolas-Jay has recently bought property in the Dundee Hills for a new winery, which will open for the 2020 vintage.

### WALTER SCOTT

The thriving new venture launched by wine salesman-turned-vintner Ken Pahlow and his wife Erica Landon. The pair started in 2009 with 600 cases and now produce 10 times that from some of the most prestigious sites in Oregon, including Seven Springs, Freedom Hill and others. The style here is concentrated and citrusy, with strong saline notes – the most Chablis-like wine you'll find in the Willamette Valley.



Located in Yamhill-Carlton, it proved ideal. The south-facing site was planted in the 1980s and produces relatively mature fruit. Méo sees great potential here: 'Oregon Chardonnay is really restarting with a style of its own, not at all following the California guidelines but experimenting along a Burgundian track.'

### Array of styles

Ken Pahlow of Walter Scott Wines is another profoundly influenced by Dominique Lafon, having worked with him at Evening Land and for a harvest in Burgundy – he has modelled his work in Oregon on his experiences there. 'In Burgundy, I noticed that the first five people to pick were Lalou Bize-Leroy, Arnaud Ente, Coche-Dury, Lafon and Roulot, and these had some of the lowest yields too,' he says. 'We decided with all our growers that we would aggressively thin the shoots.' He practises long ageing in cask with a high percentage of lees to

bring a hint of reduction. 'We like a little reduction because we believe Willamette Valley Chardonnay is ageworthy,' he says, echoing the sentiment of his mentor Lafon.

New World techniques come into play as well. Maggie Harrison's first job was as assistant winemaker to Manfred Krankl at Sine Qua Non; today she is the winemaker at Antica Terra. Her stance on picking couldn't be more different. She describes working with grower Dick Shea on the fruit for her first vintage of Chardonnay in 2011: 'We let it hang until it tasted great; until the skins were golden and the seeds were brown; until it was filled with flavour and the acid felt super clear and sort of electric.' Harrison picks when the acidity tastes right, but leaves the grapes in baskets to continue to ripen. The results are lush and very luxurious.

For some producers, winemaking is almost more critical than terroir. Chris Hermann,



Pierre Millemann and winemaker Wynne Peterson-Nedry, OO Wines

owner of OO (Double Zero) Wines, works with Burgundy-based consultant Pierre Millemann. Millemann picks early, foot-treads the grapes and macerates the juice and skins overnight before pressing. During the pressing, the must oxidises intentionally, turning dark. Hermann calls this the Black Chardonnay technique. The top wines can see as much as 18 months in cask and the results are impressive, aided by the fact that Hermann's extensive contacts in the Willamette Valley supply him with grapes from top sites, including Seven Springs.

Between the Burgundian invasion and the one from California, a diverse array of Chardonnay styles exist in Oregon. One thing is certain: consumers who love Chardonnay that is racy, lean and mineral but still concentrated are spoiled for choice. Producers that err on the side of lushness may be missing the point, but those who keep it fresh and don't overdo the oak merit your full attention. **D**

## The Curtis dozen: top Chardonnays from Oregon's Willamette Valley

### ① **Lingua Franca, Estate, Eola-Amity Hills 2018** 96

POA **Berry Bros & Rudd**

Lovely, expressive notes of juicy grapefruit and ripe pear, toast and oak spice make an appearance but the cask ageing is very well integrated. The overall impression is of a consummate balance between richness and freshness, with another layer of firm underlying acidity too, and the wine lingers enticingly. As consultant Dominique Lafon notes: 'Our better wines are not the bigger. Our selection is on refinement.' **Drink 2020-2030 Alcohol 12.5%**

### ② **Walter Scott, X Novo Vineyard, Eola-Amity Hills 2018** 96

£48.18 (2017) **Justerini & Brooks**

Citrusy and mineral aromas, almost saline, with a lemon, green apple and apricot fruit character and plenty of depth. The acidity is vibrant and fresh, and the texture racy and very fine. Ken Pahlow is producing some of the most Chablis-like wines in the US – there's no fat here, but concentration and structure provide a marvellous length. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%**

### ③ **Evening Land, Seven Springs Estate La Source, Eola-Amity Hills 2017** 95

£71.99 (2015) **Handford**

Density and freshness, with aromas of lemon curd and fresh flowers – a bit of spice, but the oak influence is well integrated, underpinned by a marked mineral component. The fruit comes from the base of one specific lava flow in the celebrated Seven Springs Vineyard, is vinified in 500L puncheons and sees a year in cask (10% new) and a further six months in tank. Superbly balanced and could age for a decade or more: impressive! **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13%**

### **Bergström, Sigrid 2018** 94

POA **Roberson**

Initial aromas of passion fruit and pomelo are arresting, tropical but not heavy, with a hint of well-integrated oak spice that carries over onto the palate. The texture is silky and very fine with refreshing crispness and a gentle persistence. Produced from a blend of fruit from the south-facing Bergström Vineyard and the Silice Vineyard. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.4%**

### **Domaine Serene, Récolte, Dundee Hills 2016** 94

N/A UK **www.domaineserene.com**

A selection of the best estate vineyards, including Clos du Soleil, Côte Sud, Etoile and Clos de Lune, aged 17 months in cask (70%

new) and a year in bottle before release. A massive wine, the product of a very warm year, yet supremely elegant. Aromas of dried apricot, lime peel, beeswax and spice, with intense concentration on the palate, but enough acidity to keep it all in balance. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14.2%**

### ④ **OO Wines, VGW 2017** 93

N/A UK **www.oo-wines.com**

This provocative wine is produced from grapes sourced from a variety of vineyards, most in Eola-Amity Hills, using the oxidative

'Black Chardonnay' method: foot-treading, extended skin contact and no SO<sub>2</sub> for the must. The results are delicious: the lush, ripe fruit comes through clear as a bell. The texture is dense and compact but not heavy, and lingers impressively on the finish. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.9%**

### ⑤ **Morgen Long 2018** 93

N/A UK **www.morgenlong.com**

This newcomer, a specialist in Willamette Valley Chardonnay, is producing some of the most elegant, nuanced wines in the valley. His entry-level offering in 2018 was among the brightest discoveries of my recent tastings. There are restrained citrus and floral notes upfront and a fresh, lively texture allied with a subtle density on the palate. The wines are fermented on native

yeasts in a combination of large and small casks and stainless-steel tanks, then aged for 18 months. Very elegant, sophisticated wine. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.2%**

### **Domaine Drouhin Oregon, Arthur, Dundee Hills 2017** 92

£26.44-£29.95 (2016) **Berry Bros & Rudd, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Christopher Keiller, Hic, NY Wines of Cambridge, The Drink Shop, Wine Direct**

Classically elegant. Racier even than many of the Drouhin offerings from Burgundy, this opens with bright, pure citrus fruit. The complexity develops with time, as the limited cask maturation (10 months, 15% new) reveals itself. Fermented half in cask, half in tank, the texture is silky, lithe and crisp, but there is still enough substance to satisfy. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.9%**

### **Lavinea, Lazy River, Yamhill-Carlton 2017** 92

N/A UK **www.lavinea.com**

Picked in October with modest sugar levels and plenty of acidity, the grapes come from volcanic soils, gently pressed, fermented and aged 12 months in cask (15% new), with the full malolactic fermentation finished. Forward aromas of orange peel and ripe pear, a hint of spice. Refreshingly juicy and fresh, this is a taut, elegant wine of rewarding persistence. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.3%**

### **Nicolas-Jay, Bishop Creek, Yamhill-Carlton 2018** 92

N/A UK **www.nicolas-jay.com**

A superb example of the whites from this project. The vines at the top of this slope on Bishop Creek estate were only recently budded over from Pinot Gris to Chardonnay, but the results are marvellous, with a luxurious ripe-apple fruit and a leesy hint of spice. Rewarding freshness and length on the palate – it's a wine that will age. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.5%**

### ⑥ **Domaine Divio, Clos Gallia Estate, Ribbon Ridge 2018** 91

N/A UK **www.domainedivio.com**

Burgundian winemaker and co-owner Bruno Corneaux uses a generous oak maturation here (14 months in 40% new casks), but it does not overwhelm the ripe-apple fruit that's edged with hints of white flowers. Firm, concentrated and long, this benefits from a lively texture, impressive density and good length. Produced from his recently developed estate vineyard in the Ribbon Ridge AVA. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.7%**

### **Antica Terra, Aequorin 2017** 90

£159 **Hedonism, The Wine Treasury** Despite the warm, dry conditions in 2017, Maggie Harrison picked her Chardonnay late, finishing two weeks after the Pinot Noir. The result is full of rich, golden, honeyed fruit aromas and a ripe, lush style on the palate. The texture is creamy and fine, with a luxurious oak treatment (17 months' ageing) that marks the wine on the finish. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13%**

