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Oregon Transplants

Enticed by fondness for a fickle wine grape, a surprising number of Minnesotans have found a home in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

BY DAVID MAHONEY

Compared to long-established wine regions like Napa Valley, Oregon's Willamette Valley still seems like a new frontier. Its winemaking history dates back only to the late 1960s, and it didn't become an official appellation until 1984. But what it lacks in longevity it makes up for in focus. Because this is a place almost single-mindedly devoted to one varietal: Pinot Noir.

The success of this seductive red wine has fueled the growth of Oregon's wine industry from some 65 wineries in the entire state 25 years ago to more than 200 today in the Willamette Valley alone. Among those lured to the Willamette Valley by the siren call of Pinot Noir are several Minnesotans. Some of them appear to have followed the advice that the way to make a small fortune in the wine business is to start with a large one; others have boot-strapped their way into the wine world in a way that would be impossible in places like Napa.

If opulence is evidence that a wine region has made it into the big leagues, Domaine Serene's hilltop winery is Exhibit A for the arrival of the Willamette Valley. "We wanted to make a statement that this place was worth the investment," Grace Evenstad explains as she shows a visitor around the imposing Tuscan-inspired facility, complete with a tower and an ornate tasting room outfitted with chandeliers and a massive fireplace.

It's a far cry from the 42-acre parcel of freshly logged land in the Dundee Hills where Grace and her husband, Ken, secured their first toehold in the area back in 1989. "It was a mess," Grace succinctly states. Maybe it's just as well that it was so socked in by fog the day they first looked at it that they could hardly see it. But like making Pinot Noir, the Evenstads apparently like a challenge. That raw property, about a mile from the current winery site, became the cornerstone of a multi-vineyard enterprise comprising 500 acres in

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WELLS-KRAMER



prime locations throughout the valley.

It didn’t happen overnight. The idea of starting a winery incubated for 20 years while Grace raised their two children in their Wayzata home (which they still own) and Ken turned a flagging pharmaceutical company he had acquired into a thriving business. They knew they would want to focus on Pinot Noir, but they decided Burgundy was too expensive and California too warm to provide the ideal conditions for the adversity-loving grape. Then, one evening, a bottle of Oregon Pinot Noir shared with friends opened their eyes to the state’s potential. A week later, they were on a plane to Portland.

Grace says that they started Domaine Serene with a simple goal: “Our mission was to make Pinot Noir that was consistently excellent.” That’s no small task, given the notoriously finicky nature of the grape, which Grace characterizes as “a fussy little princess.” Yet their flagship bottling, Evenstad Reserve, has managed to meet that high standard for at least the past 15 years. What’s more, it sells remarkably well and is a staple at restaurants across the country.

There has been a bump or two along the road as Domaine Serene has become one of Oregon’s top Pinot Noir producers, including a lawsuit filed against a departing winemaker alleging he took trade secrets with him. (The case was settled out of court.) But the Evenstads’ commitment to making great wine remains as clear-sighted as it was on that fateful foggy day back in 1989.

It was a job, not a quest to make fine wine, that brought Annie Shull to Oregon. Looking out over Raptor Ridge’s estate vineyard from the deck off the nearly new winery’s tasting room, Shull recounts the twists and turns that led her from her childhood home in St. Paul’s St. Anthony Park neighborhood to this idyllic spot in the Willamette Valley’s Chehalem Mountains appellation, just 13 miles from downtown Portland.

She had been working for a high-tech company in Silicon Valley when she received a promotion that brought her up to the company’s headquarters in Beaverton. Having moved around a lot during and after college, Annie was happy to find a place where she could see herself nesting for a while. “Nothing ever really felt like home until I got here,” she says.

Although her professional relationship with the tech company ended when it was bought by IBM in 1999, a personal partnership she forged while there has proved more long-lasting. She ended up marrying co-worker Scott Shull, who had gone from dabbling in winemaking as a hobby to moonlighting as a commercial winemaker, making Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris in a renovated barn behind his house. After the tech company was sold, Scott got another day job (at Intel, where he still works) and Annie came on board as a full partner at Raptor Ridge, with responsibility for sales and marketing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BECCA SABOT

a panoply of pinot Pinot Noir dominates the offerings of Willamette Valley winemakers, including the wines made at Domaine Serene.



After outgrowing the barn, Raptor Ridge winged its way from one shared production facility to another before finally alighting a couple years ago in its own custom-built winery at the edge of its 18-acre estate vineyard, mostly planted to Pinot Noir. “It was a bit of a roundabout journey,” Annie says with a laugh, “and I’m never moving again.”

In addition to making wine for Raptor Ridge, Scott lends his oenological expertise to several other Willamette Valley ventures. One of these is Le Cadeau, the label owned by former Minnetonka residents Tom and Deb Mortimer.

Tom, a paper-industry executive and longtime wine enthusiast, fell in love with Oregon after visiting a transplanted friend from his native Chicago in 1994. He ended up buying a recycled industrial packaging business in Dundee, right in the heart of the Willamette Valley wine region. Not long after, he got the itch to start looking at property, with an eye toward turning it into a vineyard at some point.

“Let’s just buy a piece of grape dirt, and maybe we’ll plant it,” was how he put the idea to Deb. So in 1997 they bought a property on the edge of the Chehalem Mountains appellation that had been logged 40 years earlier. “Tom doesn’t sit well, though,” Deb explains. “So literally five weeks later we started to develop it.”

One thing Tom liked about the land was that it was remarkably rocky. “I knew from my wine collecting that some of the best wines in the world are made from rocky soil,” he says. And although some vineyard experts they brought in to look at the property questioned how they’d even get posts in the ground, the Mortimers managed to get half a dozen acres planted, and in 2001 they had their first harvest. “When we were able to taste the wine, it was apparent that it was a really great site,” says Tom.

The Mortimers now have 14 acres of Pinot Noir vines surrounding the compact house they built on the property. The vineyard is divided into several distinct blocks, and the grapes from each of the blocks are vinified separately under the direction of a different consulting winemaker at his or her home winery. “Tom and I focus mostly on the vineyard and the winemakers focus on the eonology, but it’s collaborative,” Deb says.

birds of a feather Scott and Annie Shull of Raptor Ridge have found an accommodating roost at their custom-built estate winery.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ALLISON INN & SPA

High Living in the Valley

Until recently, visitors to the Willamette Valley looking for luxury lodgings had little choice but to drive up to Portland for the night. With the opening of The Allison Inn & Spa in the heart of the valley, comfort-seeking oenophiles no longer have to leave the vineyards behind. In fact, they can gaze out over the inn’s own five-acre Pinot Noir vineyard from the cushy window seats of their guest rooms.

Pampering and Pinot go hand in hand at The Allison’s spacious spa, where guests can enjoy soothing “Pinot Therapy” treatments. And Jory, the inn’s sparkling restaurant (named for the most prominent local vineyard soil), features more than 150 Willamette Valley Pinot Noirs on its extensive wine list. Sunny Jin, Jory’s Korean-born but Minnesota-raised chef, works wonders with locally sourced food, including produce from the inn’s own garden.

Located in Newberg, Ore., The Allison Inn & Spa has 85 guest rooms. Rates range from \$315 to \$1,100. For more information, go to theallison.com.





“There’s a tendency in the U.S. to focus on rock-star winemakers,” says Tom. “The Le Cadeau model is much more European in that the central feature is the dirt. If there’s a rock star in the whole thing, it’s the vineyard.”

Witness Tree Vineyard, in the Willamette Valley’s more southerly Eola-Amity Hills appellation, has deep roots in Northfield’s St. Olaf College. That’s where owners Carolyn and Dennis Devine met and where winemaker and vineyard manager Steven Westby was enrolled a couple decades later when he met his wife, Sonja, who also happens to be Carolyn’s cousin. Most of their children have attended St. Olaf, too. “They should name a building after us,” Steven jokes.

Dennis financed the purchase of the winery with a buyout he received after the pharmaceutical company he worked for merged with another company. Steven, who had been the wine buyer at Surdyk’s in Minneapolis, came on board as cellar master and marketing director. He took on his current responsibilities after the original winemaker died.

“Steven knows every inch of this vineyard — when to pick it, how to thin it and everything else, plus taking care of the grapes when they come in,” says Dennis.

Like most Willamette Valley wineries, Witness Tree is planted mostly to Pinot Noir, though there’s also some Chardonnay, Viognier, Pinot Blanc, even a little Dolcetto. On a tour of the no-frills production facility, Steven points out a small tank where he’s experimenting with a sort of nouveau Dolcetto for early release.

The tasting room, housed in a double-wide trailer, has homey touches, like a framed picture of the Devines’ grandchildren, for whom they’ve named various vineyard blocks and wines. Dennis says he frequently discovers surprising connections with people who stop by to sample their wines. “One of the joys of this place is it’s such a small world,” he says.

An internship at Witness Tree was part of Johanna Sandberg’s on-the-job winemaking training. Over the past decade, Johanna and her husband, Don, have patched together enough working knowledge to allow them to successfully manage an 11-acre vineyard and make some 800 cases of Pinot Noir annually in the Eola-Amity Hills — all while building a house and raising two young children.

The name of their winery, Iota Cellars, is a nod to Johanna’s Greek heritage and also refers to the small scale of their operation. “It’s all about small quantities,” says Don. He considers himself a “garagista,” as he puts it, because the Sandbergs’ winery — just a stone’s throw from their new house — is essentially a well-insulated garage.

The Sandbergs met while living in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis. A 1998 Oregon vacation inspired them to move to Portland the next year. And in 2000, they moved south to the hillside property near Amity with the idea of turning the mostly bare land into a productive vineyard.

“We didn’t know much about it, but we hired all the right people to tell us what they were seeing,” admits Don. He adds that, though the site is generally west-facing, it’s kept cool by coastal air that funnels through a gap in the coastal mountain: “There’s just a rush of cold air every single night. People from Dundee come over, and we’ll sit outside at night and they’ll say, I can’t believe how cold it is over here.”

Between the two of them (and Johanna’s brother and sister-in-law, who offer some financial and marketing support), Don and Johanna seem to have the right balance of talent and temperament to keep their joint venture on track. “Don can do plumbing or jump on a tractor. He’s not the kind to sit and read a manual — he’ll just do it,” says Johanna. “I’m the studious one and he’s the doer, so it works out really well.”

“This was forest when we bought it,” Mark Bjornson says as he drives his ATV past newly planted vines and a staked-out plot of dirt where the Bjornson Vineyard winery will soon take shape. “It was just wild and wooly. We’ve put in countless hours clearing it and planting it.”

Mark, his wife, Pattie, and their four children live in a modest but comfortable home on this hilltop in the Eola-Amity Hills. A tall wind turbine that supplies most of their power attests to the steady breezes that blow in from the ocean. “It seems that the wind really helps the grapes,” Mark says. “They grow a little more slowly — we always harvest a little bit later.”

Mark and Pattie met in 1984 while studying at the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management. The seed idea of owning a vineyard was planted nine years later on a tandem bike trip through the Riesling vineyards along Germany’s Mosel River.

Like the Sandbergs, the Bjornsons have developed their expertise through community-college classes and internships. And they’re not reluctant to tap a top winemaker in the area if they need a question answered, Mark says: “The great thing about Oregon is that people help you out to a tremendous extent.”


And it probably won’t be long before the Bjornsons are the ones dispensing helpful advice to other budding winemakers who have followed their dreams to Oregon. 

PHOTO BY ENERGY TRUST OF OREGON

canine and vines Thor joins Mark and Pattie Bjornson for a stroll through their recently planted vineyard.

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