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**A Young Oregonian's Wide Range**

By ERIC ASIMOV

People in the wine industry — writers, especially — rely on an awful lot of generalizations.

Chardonnay is this, cabernet is that, drink such and such with eggplant but never with swordfish. Certainty is so much more comfortable than ambiguity.

A case in point: Oregon pinot noir.

The orthodox view of Oregon pinot noir places it somewhere between the exuberant fruity ripeness found in California pinot noirs and the leaner, more subtle grace characteristic of Burgundy. Such specificity, of course, is almost pointless. Neither California nor Burgundy can be boiled down to a single style, nor can Oregon.

Oregon in fact is capable of a wide stylistic range of pinot noirs, just as California and Burgundy are, and any bottle of Oregon pinot noir can defy expectations.

I've had big, rich Oregon pinot noirs that, if they don't quite achieve the heights in alcohol that are possible in California, still fill the mouth with opulent sweet fruit. And I've had beautifully delicate pinot noirs, floral and nuanced, that are capable of aging and evolving for decades.

The truth, if I may use such an elusive term, is that Oregon pinot noir is still far more dependent on the stylistic inclinations of the producer than it is on the evocative properties of the land.

At this early stage in its evolution, it seems to me, it makes little sense to speak of Oregon, or of the Willamette Valley, Oregon's leading pinot noir region, as if the land somehow brands the wine with a particular character.

This should not surprise anybody. The Oregon wine industry began, for all intents and purposes, 35 years ago and much of the planting and growth have come in the last 10 to 15 years. That's an awfully short time to be able to speak with certainty about anything related to wine.

Even in Burgundy, where after centuries of grape growing one can speak halfway intelligently about the differences between, say, Gevrey-Chambertin and Chambolle-Musigny, the humans who make the wine are still the most important elements in determining the characteristics of the wine.

The danger of over-generalizing was reinforced recently after the wine panel tasted 20 bottles of Oregon pinot noir. The wines fell all over the spectrum, from light-bodied, restrained and simple to jammy, weighty wines that were almost overpowering.

For the tasting Florence Fabricant and I were joined by David Gordon, wine director at Tribeca Grill, and Joshua Nadel, the beverage director at Locanda Verde, also in TriBeCa.

I will say that this was one of our more difficult tastings. While we liked many of the wines, very few grabbed and held our attention.

The wines that seemed most balanced and freshest lacked complexity, while those with more going on in the glass occasionally seemed clumsy or unfocused. The difficulty in finding wines that put it all together kept our scores relatively low.

Perhaps this had to do with vintage variations. We looked for wines from the most recent vintages, and this meant either 2007 or 2006, which were very different in character.

Now, what follows is the sort of generalizing that I warned about earlier, so be wary. The '07 growing year was cool and rainy. Those producers who met the challenge were largely able to make balanced wines with moderate levels of alcohol and a lot of freshness, which comes from good acidity.

By contrast, the '06 vintage was easier in terms of the weather, and producers were able to harvest riper grapes and produce bigger, richer wines.

The wines were about equally divided among the two vintages — 11 of the 2007s, and 9 of the 2006s — but of our top 10, seven were 2007s, including our No. 1 wine, the Côte Est from Le Cadeau.

You could taste the vintage in the freshness of this wine. It was complex as well, with aromas and flavors of earth, flowers and fruit, and it was balanced. For me, it was the only wine in the tasting that transcended the divide between the welterweight and heavyweight wines.

By contrast, Florence found our No. 2 bottle, the 2006 Seven Springs Vineyard from St. Innocent, to be the most complete wine. She liked its richness, but I found it a bit too oaky.

David and I both liked the balance and delicacy of the 2007 King Estate, though we agreed it was a fairly simple wine. The 2007 A to Z also fell into this category of lightly likeable, easygoing wines.

Our best value was our No. 3 bottle, the 2007 WillaKenzie Estate, with its restrained, balanced flavors and creamy texture. It was \$27 and came topped with a screwcap.

For the tasting, we set a ceiling of \$75 a bottle, which knocked out only the very highest strata of Oregon pinot noirs. Nonetheless, 11 of the 20 wines in the tasting were \$50 or more, while only five were under \$30.

The bottom five of our Top 10 were among the most expensive wines in the tasting. We liked each of the bottles to a degree, yet they all seemed to lack an element of excitement.

I'm ordinarily a big fan of Tony Soter. His 2006 Beacon Hill, our No. 6 wine, was closed and tannic, though I'm guessing that it will improve with a couple more years of age.

This is the last Soter Beacon Hill, by the way. The Soter family has sold this vineyard to concentrate on its new Mineral Springs vineyard.

I've liked pinot noirs from both Domaine Drouhin and Brick House. We tasted the '06 Drouhin and Les Dijonnaise '06 from Brick House, but neither made the cut. Both tasted sweet and lacked precision. I've always liked pinot noirs from the Eyrie Vineyards. Unfortunately, we couldn't find a bottle for the tasting.

Twenty bottles, of course, is a small sample of Oregon pinot noir production. Yet, I think the many styles and characteristics we found offered an accurate cross section of what's going on. We may not now be able to define the characteristics of Oregon pinot noir. For now, we can live in the question.

### **Tasting Report: Pinot Noirs That Are Big or Restrained, Dense or Fresh**

1. **Le Cadeau, Côte Est 2007**, Willamette Valley, \$55  
Fresh, well-balanced and appealingly earthy, with aromas of flowers and black cherries.
2. **St. Innocent, Seven Springs Vineyard 2006**, Willamette Valley, \$50  
Big, dark and smoky with well integrated mineral and oak flavors.
3. **WillaKenzie, Estate 2007**, Willamette Valley, \$27 (BEST VALUE)  
Creamy texture, restrained flavors of cherries and raspberries.
4. **King Estate, Oregon Signature Collection 2007**, Oregon, \$30  
Easygoing, with delicate floral aromas and fresh fruit flavors.
5. **A to Z 2007**, Oregon, \$21  
Restrained, light-bodied and pleasing with straightforward fruit and mineral flavors.
6. **Soter, Beacon Hill 2006**, Yamhill-Carlton District, \$63  
Dark and tannic with aromas and flavors of black cherry and anise.
7. **Penner-Ash, Dussin Vineyard 2007**, Willamette Valley, \$70  
Big and complex with flavors of ripe, sweet fruit and lots of oak.
8. **Ken Wright Cellars, Canary Hill Vineyard 2007**, Eola-Amity Hills, \$55  
Dark and dense with saturated flavors of cherry and black raspberry.
9. **Beaux Frères 2007**, Willamette Valley, \$55  
Floral aromas, supple but intense fruit flavors.
10. **Sineann, Schindler Vineyard 2006**, Willamette Valley, \$50  
Lush, rich and powerful with concentrated fruit flavors.