

Burgundy Laid the Groundwork, Now Other Cool-Climate Wineries Are Staking a Claim in Oregon

Residing on the same latitude as Burgundy, and boasting a similar climate, Oregon — particularly the Willamette Valley — became a draw for Burgundian producers looking to make their mark in the New World. Now, winemakers from across the globe are looking to this pocket of the Pacific Northwest as a place to set down roots.

A smattering of plantings between 1847 until Prohibition in southern Oregon marked the beginning of Oregon's viticultural history. As with everywhere else in the country, Prohibition put the kibosh on the burgeoning industry (and the state actually enacted its teetotaling rules before Amendment 18 was ratified in 1919). After it was repealed in 1933, a few bonded wineries once again kickstarted winemaking. But it wasn't until 1965, when David Lett of Eyrie Vineyards planted the first Pinot Noir in Willamette Valley, that the idea that Burgundian grapes would thrive in the climate took hold. From that time forward, the region saw an explosion of activity as entrepreneurial winemakers moved to Oregon and AVAs were officially established.

Burgundy exerted its influence even in the region's nascent stages: David Adelsheim, founder of Adelsheim Vineyard, one of Willamette Valley's earliest wineries, went to Burgundy in 1974 and began a campaign to bring Burgundian clones to Oregon. From the other side of the ocean, Veronique Drouhin of Burgundy's Domaine Drouhin arrived in Oregon in 1988, laying the groundwork for others with the establishment of Drouhin Oregon.

As Oregon continued to gain acclaim for its wines — Pinot Noir, especially — outside interest and investments flowed in. And while much of the energy came from Burgundy houses looking to expand their holdings — given the limited room for growth in the home region — other cool-climate producers see Oregon as their next venture. “European families with interests in the wine business are looking in Oregon because the value proposition is so much better,” says Sashi Moorman of Evening Land Vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA. “You can leverage your brand equity that you've built and buy vineyards here in Oregon for a fraction of what it costs in California or Europe.”

From Champagne to the Chehalem Mountains

Ponzi Vineyards is one producer that seemed primed for Burgundy investments. Luisa Ponzi, daughter of Dick and Nancy Ponzi, one of Willamette's early pioneers, graduated from winemaking studies in Burgundy in 1992. “I count my time in Burgundy as integral to how I make wine,” she says. But it was Champagne-based Groupe Bollinger that acquired the winery in 2021. The head of Bollinger, Étienne Bizot, had wanted to get into the U.S. market for a while and, based on previous trips, always had a soft spot for Oregon. The Ponzis weren't actively looking for a buyer, but by cracking the door open to the idea, interested parties flooded in.

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From a business standpoint, Oregon had a lot to offer. “It’s [a category] that’s growing fairly fast, both in volume and in value,” says Jean-Baptiste Rivail, CEO of Ponzi Vineyards and executive vice president for Groupe Bollinger Americas. “The quality is extremely high and there is a commitment to sustainable farming,” he says. Bollinger opted to purchase an existing winery, rather than build from scratch, in order to quickly gain traction in the U.S. market.

Both parties are family-owned, an attractive quality on both sides when it came to the merger. “The fact that there are so many family projects in Oregon is attractive to Old World investors,” Rivail says.

Although Groupe Bollinger is widely known for its Champagne houses, there are no plans to produce sparkling wine in Oregon. Instead, the new owners plan to focus on the high-end portion of the Ponzi portfolio. Investments in the cellar and eventual plans to only work with estate fruit solidify the commitment.

Building a stronger brand identity is also paramount to the plans. “It’s been a luxury for me to reflect [with the Ponzis],” Rivail says. “There are questions they never asked themselves because they were busy doing. Having the ability to discuss, find the patterns, and therefore define their DNA, is really a great privilege.”

“When we sold it was a bit of a jolt to the community, as far as outside interest purchasing something that was beloved, homegrown family winery,” Luisa Ponzi says. “I really think that it’s only positive for our region. [N]ot everyone is thinking of the good for the community, but I do think that Bollinger was the right choice for us and the right choice for the region to move us all forward.”