



Brian Freedman Contributor

I cover food, wine, drinks, travel; host dinners; and consult on wine

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

FOOD & AGRICULTURE 4/27/2017 @ 10:39AM |

French Investors Are Betting On The Continued Success Of Oregon's Top Wines

Oregon's Willamette Valley: Home to some of the finest Pinot Noir in the world, fantastic truffles, excellent restaurants, and...French investors?

Oui.

There has been an influx of money to Oregon by a veritable flotilla of French investors and wine producers. Which, given the fact that Oregon's marquis wine region hasn't been on the map for all that long when compared to Burgundy, and that it specializes in one of the most finicky grape varieties around, is nothing short of remarkable.

For the last millennium or so, there has been a more or less complete agreement in the wine world that the benchmark by which all other Pinot Noir is measured comes from Burgundy. This isn't to say that there aren't stunning Pinot bottlings from other places—the Russian River Valley, Australia's Mornington Peninsula, Martinborough in New Zealand, and more—but with a head start of more than 1,000 years, and some of the most revered Pinot vineyards on the planet (Romanée-Conti, Bonnes-Mares, Richebourg, etc.), Burgundy is the 5,000-pound elephant in the room whenever discussion turns to Pinot Noir.

What is it, then, that has made Oregon such a hotbed of French wine investment?

“I think Oregon is a very interesting and fast moving area in a context where enthusiasm for Pinot Noir is constantly increasing,” emailed Gilles de Larouzière, President of Maisons & Domaines Henriot, which just last week announced that its American subsidiary acquired a majority of ownership in Beaux Frères in the Willamette Valley. “I think Oregon is at the beginning of its story because the vineyard is young and still relatively small. There is a great potential for growth. But this should be conditioned by rigorous rules on quality.”



He went on to explain that the attraction to the wines is a result of climate as well. “By 45° latitude, it is often compared to Burgundy in terms of climate, even if it is slightly warmer. This is really a perfect condition for growing Pinot, not mentioning the soils that provide a very interesting typicity to the wines. It is interesting to see that the AVAs [American Viticultural Areas] are well defined, with a true research on the distinctive characteristics that are related to each AVA.”

Those distinctive AVAs have been gaining traction and recognition in recent years, and consumers, sommeliers, and investors have begun to seriously explore the differences between, say, McMinnville and Ribbon

Ridge and Yamhill-Carlton. Beyond that, noted Florent-Pierre Merlier, the Burgundy-born winemaker for Willamette’s Van Duzer Vineyards, “The increase in French investments in the Willamette Valley can be explained by a couple factors,” including the perception of high-quality wines from the region, ideal growing conditions with less risk of fungal disease and hail, substantially less expensive land, and, and a unique geological phenomenon that allows wind to funnel from the Pacific to Willamette through “the Van Duzer Corridor, [which] creates the ideal conditions of warm days and cool nights, enhancing early flavor development and optimal tannin maturation.”

Jason Lett, the second-generation winemaker for Eyrie Vineyards, agrees. “What draws the French companies here is what has drawn anyone serious about Pinot Noir to the Willamette Valley: Outside of Burgundy, our climate is one of the very few in the world that is suited for Pinot,” he observed in an email. “The fact that companies from Pinot’s birthplace have invested here is an incredible validation, but anyone who’s had a glass of well-made Willamette Valley Pinot already knows why we’re here.”

Of course, outside investment in Oregon’s wines is nothing new. Remy Drabkin, of Remy Wines, noted in an email that, “The quality of Oregon wines has been unfaltering since the inception of the industry and garnered French investment at least since 1987 when Domaine Drouhin anointed the Willamette Valley. The recent buy-in by both French and California companies is not only about the consistent quality from Oregon producers, [as] we are a good investment for established wine economies, savvy to Oregon as one of the illustrious wine regions of the world. Our comparatively depressed economics have primed the region for outside investors, even if we go kicking and screaming.” Still, Drabkin continued, adjusting to outside investment is not always easy: “Change is difficult and small wineries may have trouble keeping up in a more competitive economy with wages and purchases, or they may get an influx of ideas, research, and talent.”

But the fact that French investment in particular has been rising carries with it a host of advantages, observed Robert Brittan of Brittan Vineyards. “The Burgundians bring with them centuries of wine-making tradition and experience, so that is definitely a plus,” he wrote in an email. “At the same time, they need to take the time to learn the differences in geology, soils, and climate between this region and Burgundy, and respect those differences. When they have done that, it has resulted in high quality wines.”

Like any other endeavor like winemaking in a new place, the journey to success can be a long one. “For any grower with serious intentions, it takes decades to learn how to respond to this

region,” Jason Lett explained. “Domaine Drouhin Oregon has the longest experience with Pinot Noir in this area, and it’s been fascinating to watch them over the years. They’ve achieved incredible consistency, and that’s something that just takes the kind of investment of time that they’ve been willing to dedicate. Wines from the newer French growers are excellent, but I expect their stylistic approaches to refine as they learn their sites.”

Fortunately, Robert Brittan pointed out, “the Burgundians have shown respect for this terroir and for the potential this wine region offers to make world-respected Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays.”

The most successful investments are often the result of a two-way sharing of information, experience, and passion. This summer, for example, Mr. de Larouzière will be traveling to all of his company’s French properties, including Champagne Henriot, William Fèvre, Bouchard Père & Fils, Château de Poncié, and Lejay, with Beaux Frères winemaker Michael Etzel, in order to better understand the terroirs and winemaking cultures from which the new investors are coming. “Reciprocally,” he explained, “I think Beaux Frères can bring a lot concerning the conduct of the vineyard, especially with its expertise on biodynamics. I think it has become crucial to work differently in order to preserve the unique natural heritage of the terroirs, move toward a more sustainable viticulture, and better meet growing [expectations] of the customers. Besides,” he continued, “I consider there is an ethic aspect in this respect. Our domains are already engaged in sustainable programs and certifications. Some are managed according to [biodynamic principles]. Here again, sharing expertise can only have [a] positive impact on the quality of our wines.”

For all of the French investment in Oregon, it seems, success is more a result of respect, understanding, and the desire to learn the unique land of the state’s top AVAs than anything else.

“I don’t have a different feeling with the French coming in than the Californians,” noted Alex Sokol Blosser, second-generation winemaker of Sokol Blosser Winery. “I think it’s great. The only difference is the French speak French. I will say, Burgundy is the birthplace of Pinot Noir, it’s the heartbeat of Pinot Noir. There’s no doubt that the French coming here is an exclamation mark that what we’re doing here in the New World is awesome. Everyone’s welcome. I love the French, the Australians, the Californians...it’s all good in the hood.”