

Oregon's Wine Country: Nature at its Best

A Photographic Journey Through Some
of America's Most Outstanding Vineyards

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The story behind Oregon's Wine Country began as long ago as 10,000 to 15,000 years – if we want to take the long view. That's when the catastrophic Missoula Floods from Montana and Washington contributed to the creation of just the perfect soil for growing grapes in the state. At the end of the Ice Age, the ice dam that held back Lake Missoula periodically ruptured and floods of biblical proportions would sweep across eastern Washington, down the Columbia River Gorge and inundate much of what is known today as the Willamette Valley. The result was the deposit of a rich and unusual combination of soil that included old volcanic and sedimentary seabed, overlaid with gravel, silt and rock. From a geological perspective, that's the long story.

The shorter version is a captivating, and uniquely American tale of overcoming nay-sayers, the migration of dedicated and determined families, of endless toil, a collaborative spirit between a handful of dreamers and pure grit and determination. To survive the hardships, many of Oregon's early winemakers worked at other jobs to support their wineries – teaching, selling one thing or another or working as physicians.



Previous Page: Youngberg Hill Vineyards & Inn is Oregon's premier wine country guest lodging. Its location provides guests the opportunity to explore over 80 Oregon wineries that are located just 20 minutes away from its spectacular mountain top perch.





In just 40 years, the Beaver State would emerge as a world-class wine growing region, boasting 300 wineries, fifteen viticultural areas with over seventy different kinds of grapes. The 33rd state's micro-climates are ideally suited to a multitude of varieties that are artfully transformed by boutique vineyards into award-winning wines. As you travel from vineyard to vineyard, you will often discover that it is the grower or winemaker who is pouring the wine behind the bars of their tasting rooms where wine enthusiasts happily sip, sniff and spit into silver and glass receptacles. In spite of Oregon being third nationally in the number of wineries and the fourth largest in wine volume, handcrafted wines still reign supreme and the average winery produces only 5,000 cases annually.

There was little luck involved in the growth of one of the state's major industries – just a lot of hard work. When winegrower Jim Bernau, the founder of Willamette Valley Vineyards was seen watering his over 1,000 feet of vine rows by hand with sections of garden hoses, his neighbors began to take his love of the land and passion for winemaking seriously. From Jim's humble beginnings, his vineyard has grown from a small group of Pinot noir enthusiasts into an enterprise with over 4,500 owners.

To trace Oregon's wine industry to its very roots, all one needs to do is go back to the campus of UC Davis during the

Left: Willamette Valley Vineyards is a favorite stop on wine tours and a “must see” destination during the Fall season.

politically tumultuous 1960s, because the first “wine settlers” in Oregon were refugees from that remote satellite outpost of California’s nine campus university system.

A handful of pioneers from Davis stubbornly ignored the whispers of discouragement from their cohorts regarding Oregon’s potential to become a place where superior wines could be crafted. David Lett was one of those determined pioneers. With his wife, Diana, in 1966, David established The Eyrie Vineyards and was the first to plant Pinot noir in the lush Willamette Valley. The couple’s premier vintage was created in 1970. Around that time a small cluster of winemakers and their families packed up and headed North to Oregon as well. This small cadre of stalwart vitaculturalists would become prominent in Oregon’s emerging wine industry.

In 1979 David entered a 1975-vintage Eyrie Pinot noir in the Gault-Millau French Olympiades and wine enthusiasts around the globe were put on notice that world-class wines were now being produced in Oregon. France’s position as the world’s premier wine region had its long and unchallenged reputation shattered when David’s entry trumped its best labels by receiving the top honor. From that time on, David became affectionally known as Papa Pinot.

David Adelsheim and his wife Ginny, another early pioneer, planted his family’s roots in the North Willamette Valley and founded Adelsheim Vineyard in 1971. In addition to his winery, he would also distinguish himself through his grape and wine research and in 2006, he was recognized for his achieve-







Behind the scenes wine tasting at Bethel Heights Vineyard, a multi-generational winery, is serious business.

ments in building the wine industry in Oregon and cementing its worldwide reputation.

There were many such family enterprises that contributed to the story, and as the first generation wineries began to be

passed on to a second generation of equally zealous winemakers, the story continues. When David Lett passed away, his son, Jason, took over his father's passion and enterprise. Following David's death, Jay Miller of the Wine Advocate wrote,

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“The Eyrie Vineyards has not missed a beat...from grapegrowing to elevage, this is an artisanal, noninterventionist, unique operation that continues to turn out some of the most fascinating wines on the planet.”

Many of the early wineries in Oregon were husband and wife enterprises – much as the farms had been during America’s original settlement when the West was our nation’s frontier. Today, most of those early farms and husband and wife partnerships are long gone, overtaken by agri-conglomerates or simply turned to dust during the Depression.

As Oregon’s first generation vineyards and wineries pass on to other family members, the tight-knit partnerships between spouses will undoubtedly give way to other business structures and missions. But one thing seems clear. The handcrafted nature of the state’s boutique wineries and the industry’s increased emphasis on “growing green” is a trend that will come to characterize more and more of the wines that are being crafted in the state.

New branding programs like the Oregon Certified Sustainable Wine brand (OCSW) launched in 2009, have been created to inform wine lovers around the world – right on the bottle’s label – that the wine they are enjoying has been created using responsible agriculture and winemaking techniques. Everyone is aware that certification by an independent third party carries much more weight.

One winery, Bethel Heights Vineyard, established in 1977, perhaps serves as an example of how the ownership and man-

agement of Oregon's wineries might look in the future. Originally, this award-winning vineyard had been founded, not by one, but by two families: Ted and Terry Casteel, twin brothers and their wives Pat and Marilyn. Marilyn and Terry had been practicing therapists in Seattle and Ted and Pat were graduate students researching in France, when both couples found themselves becoming passionate about wine. Their mutual interest in winemaking resulted in the family being reunited, and together with Barbara Dudley, Pat's sister, acquired 75 breathtaking acres, and a new life was begun.

Recently, the Bethel Heights' management team has been expanded to include second generation leadership and ownership, bringing a youthful energy, talent and passion into the blend. Today, both generations are solidly on board. Mimi Casteel, Ted's daughter and her cousin, Ben Casteel, are sharing responsibilities. Although on paper, Ben is Bethel Heights' Co-Owner and Winemaker and Mimi is the winery's Co-Owner and General Manager, the growing and making of wine is now a shared position between the cousins. In addition, today, there is an even greater emphasis on "growing green." Their winery was one of the first in the United States to be recognized as producers of Certified Sustainably Grown Wine and as such has contributed to changing the industry, not only in Oregon, but nation wide.

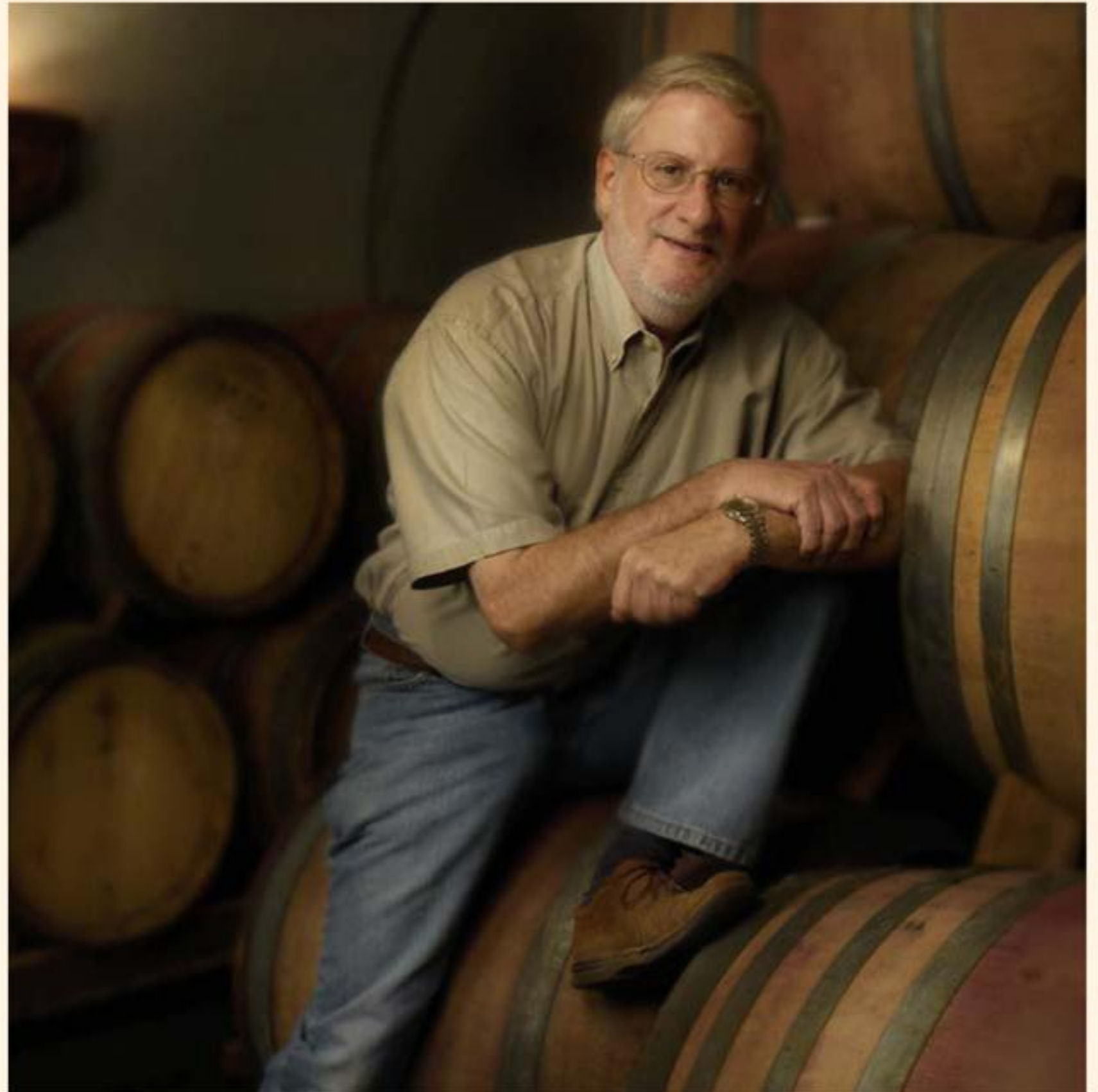
Reflecting on the significance of a second generation advancing to the helms of Oregon's wineries and what that might mean to the future of winemaking in the state, Mimi Casteel



observed, “The emergence of a second generation is precious and relevant in the changing scene found today in Oregon’s wine industry. It’s playing a major role in keeping the dream to make great wines alive.” She continued, “There is something very profound that no pressure was ever put on me or my cousin to instill that ‘dream’ within us. We were just kids putting sticks in the ground when the first vines were being planted. The fact that Ben and I both left, taking our separate paths away from Bethel Heights, and then returned with that shared dream still alive and well within us, only serves to magnify and unify our separate passions and determination to create better and better vintages.” Looking down at her desk, she paused for a moment and then looked up, concluding, “When that kind of thing happens, it’s almost ‘spiritual’ on a deeper level.”

Previous Page: Mike Sweeney entertains his dinner guest at Cherry Hill Winery where wine enthusiasts can enjoy sumptuous wine country cuisine from their “Cook House” and lodge in one of the luxuriously “rustic” cabins with views of the winery’s Eola Hills estate.

Right: David Adelsheim founded Adelsheim Vineyard in 1971. Using traditional and modern techniques, his winery practices sustainable farming and strives to craft wines that focus on elegance, complexity, and richness in flavor and texture.





Indeed, Oregon's wine country is nature at its best and it has become a place where its winemakers are stewards of the land, where the best in winemaking thrives and where sustainability has become a lifestyle. Oregon's winemakers are proving with every vintage that their dedication continues to be to the creation and production of some of the world's most complex and incredible wines. ∞



Left: David Lett (Papa Pinot) strolls between the vine rows of The Eyrie Vineyards he founded. Accompanying him is his granddaughter Marguerite and his faithful companion Wishbone. David is credited with producing the first Pinot noir in the Willamette Valley as well as America's first Pinot gris.



Bethel Heights Vineyards' mascot Jimie licks his lips over a Casteel Reserve Pinot noir.

