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discovering
BOUTIQUE WINES IN OREGON

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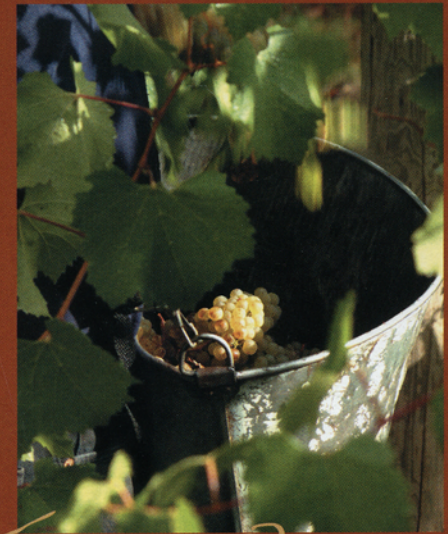
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Discovering Boutique Wines in Oregon

YOU WOULD THINK THAT DEFINING THE WORD BOUTIQUE IS EASY. Not Exactly. What is a Boutique Winery? First, think of a standard “classic” boutique. A small shop that sells particularly choice and well-selected items not typically available in many other shops. So a boutique wine has to be high quality. That’s easy.

But now think about scale; we can all agree that a boutique wine is not made in large quantities, and is not typically available in every wine shop or grocery shelf. It’s here that we run into trouble.

How small a quantity is boutique? Everyone in Oregon makes small quantities by California and Washington standards. Most wineries in Oregon produce fewer than 5,000 cases per year. California wineries would consider the entire Oregon production very boutique indeed, as most of California’s so-called boutique wineries produce more than 5,000 cases a year, sometimes more than 30,000 cases per year, with most other California wineries making vast quantities, at least by Oregon standards.

Here, a production of 5,000 cases per year can’t possibly meet the boutique standard, as boutique would then apply to at least 200 of the more than 325 wineries currently bonded in the state of Oregon. And what’s boutique about that?

So how low is low? A very difficult question to answer.

THE PORTLAND INDIE WINE FESTIVAL

But how timely, I thought, when the first Portland Indie Wine Festival was held in May. This public tasting was celebrating the wines made in Oregon in quantities of less than 1,000 cases. Were these all Boutique?

No, and I don’t think they purported to be. But the Indie Festival is a good place to start. It came to existence when LAD Communications (a public relations firm in Portland) was trying to figure out a way for Jason Lett – son of Oregon’s Papa Pinot pioneer David Lett of The Eyrie Vineyard -- to promote the first ever vintage of his own wine, called Black Cap. When Lett thought about entering IPNC (The International Pinot Noir Celebration held each summer in McMinnville to celebrate the grape), he realized that his own production of 66 cases did not meet the minimum production requirement set by IPNC (500 cases).

LAD Communications and Jason Lett then spent a year recruiting all wineries that produced fewer than 1,000 cases to create a new showcase for their wines. After a judging of the wines entered, 40 winemakers representing 66 wines were selected. Those wines were showcased at the Indie Festival. (And a general heads-up; the Indie Festival looks like it will be produced annually, so plan to attend next year to discover new producers for yourself!)

Were there Boutique Wines there? Absolutely. Jason Lett qualifies as one for sure, making superb Pinot under his Black Cap label, from grapes grown at Bishop Creek vineyard in 2003. His style is reminiscent of his father’s, all delicacy and finesse, with strong structure and length. Quality here does not come cheap; this bottle sells for \$40. Less expensive (and



slightly less good, but very nice nonetheless) is the wine he makes for Reuel Fish's Bishop Creek Cellars (selling for \$25 a bottle at Fish's Urban Wineworks in Portland).

Both the wines of Sam Tannahill and Cheryl Francis – not surprisingly called Francis Tannahill – and the wine of Bill and Deb Hatcher called – also eponymously – Hatcher Wineworks can be considered boutique. Together, these two couples make a wildly successful wine called A to Z, good value Pinot noir and Pinot gris that the partners source and blend from But it's the small lots of independent wine that each couple produces that qualifies for our purposes: Boutique. Hatcher sticks to Pinot noir, and produced a very nice one in 2003 at that; Francis and Tannahill make fine Pinot of course (and from their very well-farmed, biodynamic estate vineyards), but also tasty Syrah, Gewurztraminer, and a late harvest dessert wine from Gewurztraminer. Yum yum.

Other stars of the Indie Festival include Marcus Goodfellow with his 2003 Matello "Souris" Pinot noir

(\$20/bottle). Goodfellow by day (or really, by evening) is the bar manager at the Heathman, and follows his dreams by making wine. Among the other wines at the festival Mystic Wines 2002 Syrah was a winner, with lovely spice and meaty notes (\$20). And for value, the Rocky Ford 2002 Pinot noir (\$18) was super. Roots 2003 Pinot noir at \$20 was another well-made, nicely focused wine I'd be pleased to drink any day.

Rich Cushman at Viento Wines makes a very nice Sangiovese among his numerous varieties in very small production line up. (\$20) Very little of US-grown Sangiovese carries the classic leather and black cherry character so common in Tuscany, when it forms the base of Chianti wines. But Viento's showed very good varietal identity and quality. The 2002 version was a very good example, made in minuscule quantities!

A few of the producers at the Indie Fest grew their own grapes but had more experienced winemakers produce the wine. The Christopher Bridge 2003 Pinot noir Reserve was very nice (\$28) – but with Chris Camarda from Washington's

Andrew Will making it, shouldn't it be? The next vintage will be produced by Laurent Montalieu at his NW Wine Co. And the 2003 Zinfandel (\$24) from The Dalles-area vineyard called The Pines was made by Peter Rossbach, who also takes fruit from the same 100 year-old vineyard for his own Sineann label.

NON-INDIE TINY PRODUCERS

Other Boutique producers making under roughly 1,000 cases who were not at the tasting include Dusky Goose, made by Lynn Penner-Ash and sourced from fruit from John Carter's Dundee Hills vineyard, and Jim Prosser's wines under the J. K. Carriere label, lovely expressive wines made primarily from grapes grown at the celebrated Shea Vineyard. Jay Somers of J. Christopher Wines also produces hard-to-find, high quality wines including a very fine dry Riesling.

A number of long-time, well-known vineyard managers also claim labels of their own and offer itty-bitty quantities of high quality wine. Beaux Frères Vineyard manager Joel Meyers'

Siltstone Pinot noir from the respected Guadalupe vineyard is lovely, crafted by Mike Etzel of Beaux Frères (more about him below!). Andy Humphrey now owns the former Weber Vineyard, old vines plunk on the crest of the Dundee Hills; Lemelson Vineyard produces a fine Riesling for him and Beaux Frères (again!) likewise makes a fine Pinot noir for him, each under the ANA Vineyards label.

Domaine Drouhin, Argyle, and Stoller Vineyard manager Alan Holstein makes Granville Pinot noir and Pinot gris in very small lots, but with excellent quality; his own vineyard was planted in the Dundee Hills in 1972. Dai Crisp, longtime vineyard manager of Temperence Hill vineyard in the Eola Hills as well as his family's Croft Vineyard, produces the Lumos label and makes fine, well-structured wines from the Temperence Hill site. His 2002 Pinot noir (\$22) is big and lovely; the reserve bottling of the same year (\$30) needs more time in the bottle to evolve from its more brooding current state.



SIZE MATTERS

But how is size relevant to a discussion of Boutique wines? The Indie ideal of a maximum of 1,000 cases can't be the only requirement for a Boutique wine definition. First off, notice that most of these producers have other jobs to help finance the wine passion. Little Indie winemakers generally can't pay the rent on a production of 1,000 cases; it's just not enough revenue, even at the higher end of the price scale; it's just not feasible. Regardless of that, though, to set a production ceiling of only 1,000 cases as a definition of Boutique sets up a false paradigm: can good wine be made ONLY in that small a quantity?

Of course not. But to be considered Boutique, there has to be a ceiling of production, a limit at which your wine is no longer totally hand-crafted by you. Arbitrarily, let's say about 3,500 cases. Much more than that, and you really can't consider a winery in small-enough supply to be hard to find and of top quality: meaning Boutique.

If other people who make Boutique wines from Shea Vineyards are Boutique, then Shea itself also qualifies for sure. Shea Vineyards is one of the Willamette Valley's premier sites; numerous high-end wineries buy its fruit. Owner Dick Shea has wine made from his own rows at the vineyard as well,

historically with different winemakers crafting the wine each year. In the past such luminaries as Ken Wright of Ken Wright Cellars, Michael Stevenson of Panther Creek (and his own Boutique label, Stevenson-Barrie), and Patricia Green of the eponymous Patricia Green Cellars have crafted Shea Vineyards wines. From 2001, Shea has produced 2,500 cases of very fine wine – and now they have their own winemaker: Chris Mazepink, formerly of Lemelson. Sam Tannahill is the consulting winemaker.

Gypsy Dancer should also be considered a Boutique Winery. Owner Gary Andrus produces very fine, highly extracted Pinot noir in the Forest Grove area of the state from both his estate vineyard (about 500 cases and \$40/bottle) and Dundee Hills vineyards (1,500 cases; Stoller Vineyard, \$30/bottle; Andrus-owned, estate vineyard, \$60). The name Gypsy Dancer is also applied to Andrus-estate wine in New Zealand (in the much respected Central Otago region) – but I digress.

If the Andrus name is familiar, that's because he was the founder of Archery Summit Winery in Dayton and helped pioneer its award-winning big and oaky style. In fact Sam Tannahill was his assistant winemaker. And his daughter and her husband (Danielle Andrus Montalieu and Laurent Montalieu) produce Boutique wines for their Soléna label. Oregon can be so incestuous!