

THE EYRIE LONGEVITY REVELATION



Described by Decanter magazine as 'the most respected wine critic and journalist in the world', Jancis writes for JancisRobinson.com, The Financial Times, and for a column that is syndicated around the world. She is also editor of The Oxford Companion to Wine.

On 22 February 2015 the Lett family celebrated the precise 50th anniversary of the day on which the late David Lett planted the first Pinot Noir vine in Oregon's Willamette Valley. This region was the first outside Burgundy to have devoted itself to the Pinot Noir grape and has now established itself as a nucleus of fine Pinot production peopled by like-minded, generally co-operative, underdog non-conformists...

The Oregon wine industry evolved as a sort of counterculture, a Not California, although of course Pinot Noir had been grown in California, and pioneered by the likes of Paul Masson and Hanzell before anyone thought of planting it in the much cooler state to the immediate north.

Although Switzerland has a much longer history of growing Pinot Noir, I find it difficult to think of anywhere else outside France that was taking the variety seriously in the mid 1960s, but perhaps someone can correct me via a post on our Members' forum? Chacra in Argentine Patagonia has some Pinot Noir vines planted in 1932 but they were abandoned for many years. John Middleton of Mount Mary planted Pinot Noir in the Yarra Valley but not before 1972. I'm sure someone will correct me with some other suggestions, but when I began writing about wine in the mid 1970s it was accepted wisdom that Pinot Noir would never be produced successfully outside Burgundy.

So it was a special pleasure to be able to

attend a commemorative tasting for several hundred friends of Eyrie Vineyards in the Portland Art Museum. They had all bought tickets, but I cannot understate the human warmth apparent in the Fields Ballroom that Sunday afternoon.

David's widow Diana Lett, who told the room 'we've known each other since before winemaking or Oregon were hip', explained how, after David's death at the age of 69 in 2008, they discovered a cache of his notebooks, cuttings and photographs such as the one here of him planting the early vines at the Corvallis nursery.

His son Jason, who now runs Eyrie, gave us an illustrated presentation of his father's intentions and achievements, not least in the form of wines going back to a rare 1972 Pinot Noir and 1977 Pinot Grisein the most superb shape.

Truly, it was the vivacity of the older white wines, both Chardonnay and Pinot Gris, that were the real revelation for me, as you can see from my tasting notes below. But it was heartening that he began his talk with a vote of thanks to the vineyard manager Javier Garcia, 'who has been intimately involved, with his relatives, in making all our wines from 1985'. At Eyrie there has never been a separation between vineyard and cellar work.

The run of four flights, one for each decade, was followed by a showing of five current single-vineyard bottlings that were most convincing, and whose labels are decorated with Jason's impressively accomplished watercolours of each vineyard site.

David Lett loved making wine but hated selling it, and was a great hoarder of bottles. The family have accordingly been left with a 6,000-case legacy of mature wine. Jason's researches suggested that by no means all of them were in pristine condition, largely thanks to TCA, so has developed a 21-step system of checking and recorking every single one. These wines are now available commercially and profits from those sold on the day of the tasting went towards the Cascades Raptor Center.

A peregrine was brought along for the ride. The red tail hawk has always been on the Eyrie label since they circle over the vineyards, the name Eyrie having been chosen by David even though 'no one could spell, pronounce or understand it'.

Here's to the next half-century, and to the future of Oregon wine. The wines are presented in the flights and order tasted.

SEVENTIES

1973 CHARDONNAY ESTATE

Very fine and delicate – awfully like a fine white burgundy! Really long and complete. Drink 1983-2020 **18**

1977 PINOT GRIS WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Pale honeyed gold. Very mature nose with some marzipan but great acidity and precision. Scented. Mid to heavy. Very long. Drink 1982-2012 **17**

1972 PINOT NOIR WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Earthy nose and a bit of dried earth on the finish. Definitely losing fruit.' Drink 1978-2010 **16**

1976 PINOT NOIR BARREL RESERVE

Pale brownish ruby. Very pale rim. Light nose and showing some marginal decay but great palate with firm structure. Spicy and with a little bit of tannin still. Pale finish. But actually it's quite amazingly persistent and reminds me of a herbal red vermouth. Grew in the glass.

Drink 1986-2012 **17**

EIGHTIES

1984 CHARDONNAY ESTATE

Lots of chew and not much flesh. Menthol. A bit coarse in texture.

Drink 1983-2020 **16.5**

1983 PINOT GRIS WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Off dry and really quite Alsacien. Amazing depth and structure.

Drink 1990-2017 **17**

1986 PINOT NOIR BARREL RESERVE

Lively and fresh on the nose. Spicy again and a little hard and slightly tough on the end. Very definitely needs food. Dry finish. Perhaps David Lett kept it because he was worried about the tannins. Falls away fast.

Drink 2000-2020 **16.5**

1980 PINOT NOIR SOUTH BLOCK RESERVE

Violets on the nose – very pretty, masses of fruit, sweetness, structure and density. Marvellous relic really and with such vigour.

Drink 1990-2020 **17.5**

NINETIES

1991 PINOT GRIS WILLAMETTE VALLEY
Honey colour. Marzipan and fragrant. Then youthful grip and acidity. Miraculous for the age. Lovely rich finish and undertow but much livelier than most Alsace examples. Miracle of longevity.
Drink 1995-2020 **17.5**

1995 CHARDONNAY ESTATE
Sweet and rich but with lots of acidity too. Racy and nervy with some herbal quality. Lots of substance. Substantial. Improved in the glass. Lots of polish.
Drink 2000-2020 **17**

1998 PINOT NOIR WILLAMETTE VALLEY
Autumn mulch on the nose. Dry finish. Herbal thread. Very pure and correct mature Pinot and only medium body. Really quite remarkable poise. Youthful! Very clean.
Drink 2006-2026 **17.5**

1992 PINOT NOIR SOUTH BLOCK RESERVE
Mid ruby. Violets on the nose and extreme sweetness on the palate. A little jagged but so full of oomph. Kerpow! Côte de Nuits – definitely! Still some fine tannins here.
Drink 2004-2028 **18**

TWENTIETH CENTURY

2004 PINOT GRIS ORIGINAL VINES RESERVE
Pale orange gold. Very scented and off dry but with good precision. Quinine and fun. Medium to full bodied. Neat and concentrated.
Drink 2008-2020 **17**

2002 CHARDONNAY WILLAMETTE VALLEY
Clean, fresh and quite skinny and vegy. Racy and medium bodied. Savoury and correct.
Drink 2010-2025 **17.5**

2005 PINOT NOIR WILLAMETTE VALLEY
Light and a little tart but very much in the modern idiom. Just the sort of Pinot Noir everyone wants to make now! Very sleek and lovely and refined.
Drink 2015-2035 **17.5**

2007 PINOT NOIR SOUTH BLOCK RESERVE
Whatever the recipe, this is a stunning wine (that does taste as though there were some stems in there). Racy and transparent and lots of fruit and racy. So fresh!
Drink 1990-2020 **18.5**

SINGLE VINEYARDS

2012 PINOT NOIR SISTERS VINEYARD
Very pale crimson. Light and fresh with delicacy and lots of acidity. Cool.”
Drink 2018-2030 **17**

2012 PINOT NOIR OUTROP VINEYARD
This is quite rich and round with the most beguiling top note of violets and beautiful precision on the palate. Seriously scrummy.
Drink 2017-2030 **18**

2012 PINOT NOIR ROLLING GREEN VINEYARD
Lightly vegetal nose and chunky palate on this youthful wine. Very solid, lightly medicinal and bumptious.
Drink 2020-2035 **17.5**

2012 PINOT NOIR DAPHNE VINEYARD
Deep crimson. Solid, dense, sinewy wine that seems drier than the rest. In fact it is still pretty austere and chewy. A real long-distance runner.
Drink 2022-2035 **17+**

2012 PINOT NOIR ORIGINAL VINES RESERVE
Great juice, fruit and depth. Yet there is sufficient zip and raciness to keep the wine refreshing – with good structure underneath.
Drink 2018-2032 **17.5**

