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Uncorking Memories

A casual tasting of vintage wines brings together veteran Oregon winemakers



Winemakers Tony Soter, Ben Casteel, Eric Hamacher, Mike Etzel, Rollin Soles, Luisa Ponzi, Adam Campbell, Lynn Penner-Ash and David Millman recently gathered to taste vintage bottlings of Oregon wine. (Tim Fish)



By Tim Fish

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Willamette Valley is a big neighborhood of old friends, winemakers who've known one another for years but rarely get together. Fellow winemakers

Luisa Ponzi and Rollin Soles rectified this just before harvest 2021, inviting a few vintner friends to bring vintage wines to share. It's hard to know what was more satisfying: tasting the wines or listening to the table talk of these veteran Oregon winemakers.

Ponzi, whose family is one of Oregon's wine pioneers, hosted the tasting at her winery. Gathered around a big table were many other long-standing Willamette Valley winemakers, including Argyle founder Soles, who focuses now on Roco; Elk Cove's Adam Campbell; Bethel Heights' Ben Casteel; David Millman, managing director of Domaine Drouhin Oregon; and Mike Etzel of Beaux Frères and Sequitur. Eric Hamacher, Lynn Penner-Ash and Tony Soter were also in attendance.

"The opportunity to taste wines which have a continuity of vineyards and winemakers over decades is something truly special," Ponzi began. "Not to mention, celebrating the rich history of the community and characters that exists here." It was a casual, non-blind tasting, and the wines were generally 20 years or older. Some vintners were excited to share a rare or favorite wine, while others wanted to prove that certain vintages got a bum rap and bloomed in the cellar. In total, we tasted about two dozen wines.

A few of the brave attendees, including wife-husband duo Ponzi and Hamacher, brought old Chardonnays. The oldest was Hamacher's Oregon Cuvée Forêts Diverses 1995, and the wine was still youthful and plush. Ponzi poured her Willamette Valley Reserve 2003, showing lively tropical fruit and marzipan accents. "It's interesting to see how a ripe vintage ages," Ponzi said. Casteel brought a Chardonnay from another challenging vintage: the Bethel Heights Willamette Valley Reserve 1997. "We picked after the rain but found it has aged really well," he said.

Pinot Noir was the main event, and the oldest was a Ponzi Willamette Valley 1980, pulled from the cellar by Ponzi and produced by her father, Dick. "Just mostly for historical fun," she said. The group relished the chance to taste a Pinot from Oregon's early years, though the 1980 was

past its prime. Its color was brickish, but its texture was supple and the nose was delicate.

The 1990s were well-represented. Penner-Ash shared a Rex Hill Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 1993 from her early days. "This is our last bottle," she said. "It was tough and tight early on, and a lot of people pooh-poohed the '93s." Millman dug deep in the cellar for the Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir Oregon 1993, and he said he has yet to taste a bad bottle of it.

Pouring the Pinot Noir Yamhill County The Beaux Frères Vineyard 1995, Etzel noted how dramatically the winemaking style has changed since then, as the winery picks less ripe now. Soles opened his Argyle Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Reserve 1996, which could age a few more years, and Campbell shared Elk Cove's Pinot Noir Oregon La Bohème 1999. "It was my first vintage as winemaker," Campbell said. "I love the 1999s."

Summing up, Soles said, "Great wine regions make wines that age. And despite what we might call 'missteps' today, our decades-old Pinot Noirs have stood the test of time." Etzel agreed: "What struck me most from the tasting was how these early producers were able to make world-class wines, in spite of the financial challenges and other obstacles they faced."