

## Winemakers On Board: Oregon Pinot Noir and Snowboarding

For Oregon's snowboarding-obsessed winemakers, Pinot Noir and powder are a perfect match. After a day on the slopes, they pour their best bottles at a fabulous meal in a hut high up on Mount Hood.

BY TIM EGAN

Not long after the last of the grapes in Oregon's Willamette Valley have been harvested, the first snow of the year begins to fly in the bordering Cascade Mountains. In the Willamette, "America's Burgundy," thoughts turn from Pinot Noir to piles of powder. At last, it's time for the winemakers to escape the darkness and dankness of the cellar and get some air—on snowboards.



Jim Prosser, winemaker at J.K. Carriere Wines, drinks his Pinot Noir well chilled. (Don't try this at home!)

Recently, when a Pacific storm dumped a load of snow on Mount Hood, Danielle Andrus Montalieu and her husband, Laurent Montalieu of Soléna Cellars, organized a day on the slopes for their winemaker friends, followed by a hearty dinner in an alpine hut. "I've got my father's crazy gene," says Danielle, a woman obsessed with wine and snow. Her father, Gary Andrus, was a downhill racer on the United States Ski Team before becoming winemaker at Napa's Pine Ridge and, later, the Willamette's Archery Summit. Danielle learned to ski soon after she learned to walk; she started working in the family wine business at the age of 10, doing everything from topping barrels to cleaning tanks.

When Danielle met Laurent on a trip to the Cascades in 1996, he was winemaker at Oregon's WillaKenzie Estate, where he established its reputation as a producer of some of the state's best Pinots. "I was a pretty good skier," Laurent says, "but Danielle brought me over to the snowboarding side." He'd learned how to surf in Guadeloupe, where he spent much of his childhood, so making the transition from skiing to snowboarding wasn't difficult for him.

About six years ago, as a wedding gift to each other, Laurent and Danielle purchased 80 prime Willamette acres and founded Soléna Cellars, named after their daughter. The Pinots that Laurent produces there are big, inky, intense wines that still manage to showcase the grape rather than the barrel. "I try not to overpower the wine with oak," he explains. Because Soléna's Pinot Noir Grande Cuvée is a reasonable \$25 a bottle, Danielle (who handles promotions, tastings and just about everything



else at the winery) describes it as "a wine for my girlfriends"—a bottle they might order on a casual night out together.

The Montalieu's aren't the only Willamette winemakers who head for the mountains at the first sight of snow. Several of their friends and fellow Pinot Noir masters are also snowboarding fanatics, and they often travel as a group to Mount Hood or Mount Bachelor, on the drier, east side of the Cascades. "Winter is the only time of year when we can all play," says Ken Wright of Ken Wright Cellars, the snowboarder who organized the bus trip to the Cascades where Danielle and Laurent first met.

That these rival winemakers play so well together is part of what makes the Willamette so remarkable. Says snowboarder-winemaker Adam Campbell of Elk Cove Vineyards, "People here still share knowledge and tips. We have a real sense of community." Campbell, a fourth-generation Oregonian, produces one of the state's most consistent Pinots and a characterful Pinot Gris.

Oregon's winemakers also seem to share an adventurous spirit that drives them to explore the world outside their cellars and vineyards. As Jesse Lange of Lange Winery says, "Hey, the fact that we have another life says something about the Oregon winemaker."

Campbell and Lange were among the friends on the Montalieu's recent trip to Mount Hood. The boarders (including Steve Doerner of Cristom Vineyards and Jim Prosser of J.K. Carriere Wines) spent the day cutting up fresh powder, then headed for dinner at Silcox Hut, a mile above historic Timberline Lodge—the haunted setting for a ranting Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

The après-snowboarding menu was by Vitaly Paley, the chef and owner of Paley's Place in Portland. Paley is a skier, so he knew to prepare robust dishes to replace all those burned-up calories. First came apple-brandy hot toddies and chicken liver crostini, the coarsely chopped livers flavored with garlic, anchovy and the luscious Tuscan dessert wine vin santo. Suitably primed, the snowboarders moved on to the main course of beef tenderloin subtly spiced with an unusual blend of ancho chile, fennel seeds and star anise. The potatoes alongside had been boiled, then roasted (a method that creates an especially crunchy crust), and served with *romesco*, a puree of roasted red pepper, garlic, nuts, bread crumbs and olive oil. Dessert was an amazing pie: a fluffy mix of peanut butter, cream cheese and whipped cream topped with chocolate ganache.

This was not typical ski-hut chow, the boarders agreed, as they finished their Pinots and got ready for one last glorious run.

*Tim Egan is a Pacific Northwest-based writer for the New York Times and the author of a novel, The Winemaker's Daughter.*

## Favorite Pinots

**2003 Soléna Pinot Noir Grande Cuvée \$25** Well-balanced and substantial, with firm tannins; will benefit from a few years of aging.

**2004 Soléna Pinot Gris \$18** Accessible and lively, this wine shows why Pinot Gris is the star white grape of Oregon.

**2003 Lange Three Hills Pinot Noir Cuvée \$40** A blend of grapes from three top vineyard sources (Lange Estate, Yamhill and Freedom Hill), this Pinot is bursting with black fruit and spice.

**2004 Elk Cove Vineyards Pinot Gris \$18** A wonderfully bright and juicy Alsace-style Pinot Gris, with enticing aromas of citrus and melon.

**2003 J.K. Carriere Willamette Valley Pinot Noir \$36** An earthy and medium-bodied Pinot, with a core of red and dark fruit.

**2001 Cristom Louise Vineyard Pinot Noir \$40** A single-vineyard wine with silky black cherry flavors and a fresh, lightly herbal finish.

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