

# Oregon Homes In on Chardonnay

In the shadow of Pinot Noir, finding a distinctive style

Harvey Steiman Posted: Jun 1, 2016 4:08pm ET

Josh Bergström, who has made some of Oregon's most compelling Pinot Noirs since he launched his family winery in 1998 (and has an exciting new Syrah project), has lately become enamored of Chardonnay.

"If I were to start a new winery now, it would be all Chardonnay," he said after a recent dinner with three Chardonnay-obsessed friends who paired their whites with the food of Jardinière in San Francisco. "It's real. It's palpable."

Once forgettable, Oregon's best Chardonnays today combine the tanginess and minerality of white Burgundy with the freshness and fruit expression more common in the New World. Burgundian consultant Dominique Lafon set the wheels in motion at Evening Land (first vintage 2007). Now he's working with ex-sommelier Larry Stone's new label, which debuts later this year.

Among my top scorers are Domaine Serene, Chehalem, Ayoub and Alexana. Dinner focused on Bergström's Sigrid bottlings, Ponzi and Stoller, also with fine track records in recent years.

Luisa Ponzi poured her supple, refreshing, nectarine-tinged Ponzi Chardonnay Willamette Valley Aurora Vineyard 2013, and, to demonstrate ageability, a Ponzi Chardonnay Willamette Valley Reserve 2007, which retained its creamy pear flavors and focus after nine years and cozied up to chicken with morels.

"I'm focusing more on texture," Ponzi allowed. "I love that Meursault/Chassagne kind of silkiness. I think this has the ability to hold that texture without losing the acidity and minerality."

Those elements ran through all the wines, including the two steely wines poured by Ken Pahlow of Walter Scott. A tangy, minerally Vojtilla Vineyard 2012 bottling and a slightly richer-textured Cuvée Annie (the winery's tête de cuvée) both cut through a rich sea scallop starter. Pahlow set aside a career in sales and distribution to start the winery with his wife. Their first efforts are sure-footed and worth seeking out.

Winemaker Melissa Burr poured a couple of charming Stoller 2014s. One labeled Club Exclusive was fermented in concrete vats to enhance structure and minerality; Elsie's was a bit more complex. Both showed open textures and crispness to match well with lobster with favas and chervil.

Bergström's Sigrid excelled with elegance. The 2013, tangy and steely, contrasted with the softer, more expressive 2014, both of which sidles seamlessly alongside a sturgeon steak. A 2010 showed how these taut wines can fill out with age. Their breadth matched seamlessly with LaClare Evalon, a gouda-style goat cheese from Wisconsin, and Boxcarr Campo, a lightly smoked washed-rind cow's milk cheese from North Carolina.

Rather than highlight single vineyards, Bergström blends several sites for complexity. "Blending," he believes, "is the best way to create a style."

Pinot Noir so dominates Willamette Valley that no winery has yet focused exclusively on Chardonnay. Evening Land came close, its first releases so well-received that the winery had to prove it could do Pinot Noir even better.

Will someone follow the lead of such Washington neighbors as Sixto and Ashan, labels exclusively created to explore the possibilities for Chardonnay there? "We need an all-Chardonnay winery in Oregon," says Bergström. I agree.