
5-26-2008

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Recommended Citation

Gaffney, William "Rusty", "Domaine Drouhin: Burgundy's Footprint in Oregon" (2008). *William "Rusty" Gaffney (Prince of Pinot) Collection*. Article. Submission 12.

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Domaine Drouhin: Burgundy's Footprint in Oregon

Some young people are lucky enough to get a new car from their parents. Veronique-Boss Drouhin got her own vineyard and winery. Veronique-Boss Drouhin is the daughter of Robert Drouhin, who along with Veronique's two brothers, oversees the prestigious négociant house in Beaune, Maison Joseph Drouhin. Founded in 1880 by Robert's great uncle, Joseph, Maison Joseph Drouhin has a lofty image among respected négociants in Burgundy.

Growing up in a winemaking family, Veronique was destined to become the fourth generation to fulfill the family's tradition. She graduated from Dijon University in 1985 and with urgings from her father, traveled to Oregon in 1986 to receive practical experience in winemaking according to the gospel of David with David Lett at Eyrie Vineyards, David Casteel of Bethel Heights, and David Adelsheim of Adelsheim Vineyard. Robert Drouhin had visited Oregon in 1961 and was struck by the resemblance of the Willamette Valley to the Côte d'Or. He was particularly impressed by David Lett's Eyrie Vineyards 1975 South Block Reserve Pinot Noir which finished ahead of some of Drouhin's Burgundies in blind tastings.

In 1987, Robert Drouhin bought 100 acres in the Dundee Hills overlooking the town of Dundee and sent Veronique to oversee planting of the vineyards in 1988. She crafted the first three vintages, 1988 to 1990, from purchased grapes, and these wines were well received by the wine press. More land was purchased (today there 225 estate acres, 84 of which are planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay), and in 1989, a new four-level gravity-fed winery was constructed. Much of the winemaking equipment in the new winery came from Beaune. Maison Joseph Drouhin became the first Burgundy house to make wine outside of France and remains the only significant Burgundy presence in the New World.

The vineyards at Domaine Drouhin Oregon (DDO) are among the most densely planted in the United States. The objective was to create more competition among the vines leading to lower yields. In 1988, when planting began, the norm in Oregon was for vines to be 6 feet apart and the rows 8-10 feet apart. Initially a compromise was struck and the vines were planted 1 meter apart with the rows planted 7 feet apart. The initial plantings were Pommard and Wädenswil clones on their own rootstock since no phylloxera-resistant rootstock was available at the time. In 1989, DDO transitioned to a 1 meter by 1.3 meter template creating over 3,100 vines per acre (a typical vineyard in Oregon is 800-1,400 vines per acre) and the vineyard was converted to primarily Dijon clones 115 and 777. DDO became the first Oregon winery to plant the new Dijon clones and the first to use phylloxera-resistant rootstock. The close plantings necessitated the importation of a special French tractor to assist in farming. Severe pruning has been the rule and the resultant low yields are such that a vine only produces about 3/4 of a bottle of wine. Philippe, Veronique's brother, has managed the vineyards since the beginning. Chardonnay came later, with the first release of Arthur, named after Veronique's son, in 1996.

Over the years, Veronique-Boss Drouhin (her husband, Michel Boss, is a website designer and together they have three children) has been a long-distance winemaker and continued to live in Beaune, traveling periodically to Oregon to oversee DDO. Barrel samples are sent to her by Fed Ex so she can monitor the progress of the wines. She has developed quite an affection for Oregon and its wines. She says, "I have no doubt that the finest Pinot Noir outside Burgundy will come from Oregon, also perhaps from New Zealand. I'm not so sure about California, where the climate is warmer, the wines are richer and more powerful." That

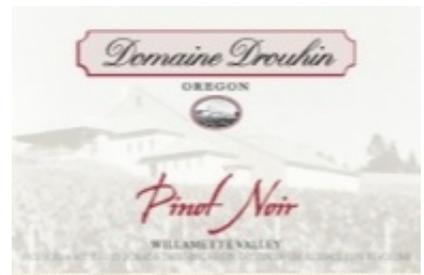
said, she believes Oregon has a ways to go. "I am not prepared to say that we are yet making great wines, wines that move us and inspired great emotion. That we can do in Burgundy with our best crus, and that is our challenge in Oregon." (Quotes from Wine People by Stephen Brock, 2001).

The Pinot Noirs of Domaine Drouhin Oregon have emphasized balance and elegance over robustness, and although they can be quite charming upon release, they age magnificently. Oak character is kept to a minimum (new wood has been gradually decreased over the years to about 20%). The grapes are usually all de-stemmed, natural yeasts are employed, and the wines are aged for twelve months in barrel. Veronique likes to say that the wines are "Burgundian at heart, but with North West intensity." The wines have more extraction and fruitiness than those from Maison Joseph Drouhin, but less extraction than many other Oregon Pinot Noirs. Three Pinot Noirs are produced. The Domaine Drouhin Classique (\$45) is held in bottle for nine months before released (10,000 cases). It is a soft, accessible style. The Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Laurène (\$65) has been made since 1992 and is named after Veronique's first daughter who was also born in 1992. This wine is a barrel selection showing more structure, extraction and age ability. (2,000 cases). The Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Louise was first produced in 1999 and is named after Veronique's youngest daughter. It is a special selection of favorite barrels and is extremely limited (8 barrels). The Louise has a little less structure than the Laurène, but with more elegance and finesse (\$80). It is sold only at the winery and to winery club members.

The Domaine Drouhin wines have been consistent in quality and this has not gone unnoticed in Burgundy. Despite this, the Burgundians are a conservative lot which explains why Maison Joseph Drouhin remains the only Burgundy house with a serious Oregon commitment.

There have been a string of talented Managing Directors at DDO. Bill Hatcher was the first and after fourteen years left to be part of a partnership that operates A to Z Wines in Oregon. Scott Wright followed him and now owns Scott Paul Wines in Carlton. The current Managing Director is the affable David Millman. If you need any information about Domaine Drouhin Oregon Wines or wish to arrange a tour, contact him at david@domainedrouhin.com or phone 503-864-2700. The winery's tasting room is open Wednesday through Sunday from 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM and offers the opportunity to taste Oregon and French wines side by side.

Recently I had the pleasure of attending a dinner and vertical tasting of Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noirs at Parkway Grill in Pasadena, California. The hosts, David (below right) and Janeen Lee, are literally lovers of wine (check out their website: www.loverofwine.com). Fifteen vintages of Domaine Drouhin Classique dating back to 1992 and two vintages each of Domaine Drouhin Laurène and Domaine Drouhin Louise were presented. The evening's conversation was spirited and the food was exquisite. David Millman (below standing left) was present, and his encyclopedic knowledge of Domaine Drouhin wines, as well as his bonhomie, made for a special event.



A few observations: (1) The first three vintages of Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir, 1988-1990 were made from purchased grapes; (2) The wines are in general closer to Burgundy in style than many Oregon wines; (3) All of the older good vintages aged remarkably well. The 1992 and 1993 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noirs were spectacular and would hold their own against any Cote de Beaune Burgundy from those years. Several years ago, Veronique Drouhin-Boss remarked that "The wines from Oregon don't so far have the longevity of the best Burgundy wines. But as viticulture practices improve, I expect the wines will become more long-lived." Maybe the wines don't have quite the longevity of many Burgundies, but their age ability is surely superior to many New World Pinot Noirs.

1992 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.5% alc.. - Still flaunting admirable color and freshness, this beautiful wine was soft and smooth, showing attractive hay and cookie dough aromas and elegant spice-kissed cherry flavors. A ringer for a well-aged Cote de Beaune wine.

1993 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · From a particularly good vintage and one of Veronique's favorites for its good acidity. Complex nose of herbs and musk leading to tart red fruit flavors. Zippy acidity on the finish produces a refreshing conclusion.

1994 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.5% alc.. · More showy with lush, velvety Pinot fruit. The aromatics are quite enticing featuring cherries, green tea and floral accents. No oak to be found. Quite impressive and would attract California Pinot Noir lovers in heat.

1995 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.5% alc.. · The 1995 through 1997 vintages were difficult ones in Oregon. The 1995 remains the best of the trio in my mind. There is still plenty of fruit here with secondary notes of leather, mushroom, barnyard, and cedar showing up.

1996 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · A very delicate Pinot Noir that is fading and out of balance, with brisk acidity to the forefront. Still a respectable drink with food.

1997 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · The lightest wine in the lineup. Very shallow fruit, simple and linear with racy acidity on the finish.

1998 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · Deep in color and showing rich, ripe red fruit flavors with herbal accents. Nicely balanced and perfectly fine now.

1999 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · I wrote "great" and that pretty much says it all. Redolent of ripe cherries, cassis, musk and hay, with a silky and plush mouth feel. Perfectly harmonious, this wine is poetic.

2000 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. · Fine but not spectacular. Attractive, but demure herbal-toned Pinot fruits, soft tannins, and a clean finish.

2001 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Deep aromas of crushed berries and wild herbs. More density and cherry fruit than the previous vintage, highlighted by musk, earth and spice. An outstanding wine that warrants a special occasion.

2002 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · The string of excellent vintages continues and this beauty is right in step. Certainly drinkable now, but has many more years ahead. Tasty berry and cherry fruit blended together creating a broad presence on the palate.

2003 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · A warm vintage in Oregon creating a wine of significant color and extraction but more simple and singularly fruit-driven. You make what the vintage gives you, but this wine is atypical for the DDO style.

2004 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Back on track with this vintage. A lovely and complex Pinot Noir showing an enticing herbal theme that runs through DDO wines. Grand in every way.

2005 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

13.9% alc., \$45. · The aromatics are redolent of a fresh cherry pie. In the mouth the cherry attack continues and the whole package is beautifully balanced. A bit angular due to its youth, but offering an enticing glimpse of what is to come.

2006 Domaine Drouhin Classique Pinot Noir

14.1% alc., \$45. · Bright and fresh sporting red berry and red cherry fruit with a razor sharp finish. Like a frisky, young pony.

2000 Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Laurène Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · A robust wine that is gentle and perfumed, yet sweet and dense on the palate, exhibiting more density and dark fruits than the Classique wine of the same vintage. The core of gentle tannins is wrapped in layers of fruit. A Pinot Noir love letter.

2001 Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Laurène Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Similar to the Classique of this vintage, but ramped up a notch. Seems awkward at this stage with an unusual medicinal note dampening my enthusiasm for it.

1999 Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Louise Pinot Noir

13.0% alc.. First year for this wine, only 75 cases. · A magnificent combination of power and finesse. Wilted roses and ripe red cherries in the nose, Great expression of Pinot fruit on the palate. Immensely satisfying and probably not yet at its nadir.

2003 Domaine Drouhin Cuvée Louise Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Very big in structure and ripe in style. Copious amounts of rich, plush red and dark fruits. Reflective of the very hot vintage.

I attended a less extensive vertical tasting of Domaine Drouhin Oregon Pinot Noirs in early 2005. Tasting notes on that tasting are in the PinotFile, Volume 4, Issue 27.

Domaine Drouhin Oregon (“Beaune in the USA”) is located off Breyman Orchards Road about two miles west of Highway 99W in Dundee. The phone is 503-864-2700 and the website is www.domainedrouhin.com. We are blessed to have this French-inspired treasure in our country.
