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Why Oregon Will Fondly Remember 2011

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

How important is vintage in discussing fine wines? I'd say we overrate it, or at least over-generalize about it. Focusing on vintage characteristics may be a helpful shorthand approach for wine writers, but usually it is too simplistic, leading to reflex decisions rather than more-considered ones.

I tend to play down the importance of a particular year because I'm more curious about how producers deal with different vintage conditions over time. If the character and methods of particular producers appeal to me, I want to know how their wines reflect different vintages regardless of how a specific year is judged critically.

The nuances of vintage differences, and the ability of good producers to triumph in years otherwise deemed bad, should not be overlooked. And fixating on great vintages can lead to missing out on an awful lot of pleasure. From Bordeaux, I've loved far more 2001s than 2000s, even though most experts pronounced 2000 the superior vintage.

From Burgundy, 2000, 2001 and 2007 are not considered great vintages for reds by a long shot. Yet the wines have been consistently delicious. I'm glad I've focused on those wines rather than holding out for higher-rated '05s and '09s.

That said, sometimes a particular vintage stands out, either because it is so unusual or because its character somehow impresses itself indelibly on the wines. Such is the case with the 2011 pinot noirs from Oregon.

The year was unusually cool and long, resulting in great anxiety for growers, who wondered if their grapes could possibly be harvested before rain and cold set in. Luckily, a clear, warm October saved the vintage. The result was wines that differ markedly from other recent vintages.

People like me who love pinot noirs of finesse and restraint will adore the 2011 vintage. The best wines are clear, focused and vivacious. Those who prefer more-powerful wines with lush, opulent fruit flavors will dismiss 2011 as too light or even as under ripe. They will find wines they like better among other recent, warmer vintages, especially 2009 and 2008.

For a closer look at the vintage, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles of 2011 pinot noir from Oregon. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Amanda Smeltz, wine director at Roberta's and Blanca in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and Josh Nadel, the beverage director at Andrew

Carmellini's NoHo Hospitality Group. Josh, by the way, also produces wine in Oregon. He is a principal at **Gothic**, a négociant that makes pinot noirs and chardonnays from the Willamette Valley. His wines were not in our tasting.

Those we did taste were characterized by freshness and subtlety, with flavors primarily of red fruits, flowers and minerals. We were happy to have found very few overbearing or overly oaky wines. Despite their delicacy, I think the best will age surprisingly well.

Given such a singular vintage, it may be hard to draw conclusions about the region in general. Nonetheless, it's clear that, as in California, a new wave of Oregon producers is striving to make wine in a lighter, more restrained style. Although this has been true for several years, a vintage like 2011 certainly played to their strengths. Not one of the bottles in our tasting hit 14 percent alcohol, remarkable among New World wines that habitually leave that mark in the dust.

While most of the bottles ranged from 12.5 to 13.5 percent, some went as low as 11 and 10.5 percent. Why the disparity? Remember, though 13.5 percent is just 3 percentage points higher than 10.5 percent, that amounts to almost 30 percent more alcohol.

I think it's fair to say that some producers felt it necessary to take the legal step in Oregon of adding sugar to the fermenting grape juice in order to boost alcohol levels and add richness. This technique, chaptalization, has a long history in cool-climate wine regions, although I doubt that it alone would account for a difference of 3 percentage points. In my opinion, it is one of the more benign manipulations available to modern winemakers.

Those working in the most natural style possible would be among the least likely to chaptalize. For what it's worth, neither Teutonic Wine Company's Bergspitze Laurel Vineyard pinot noir from the Chehalem Mountains (10.5 percent) or Bow & Arrow's Medici Vineyard, also from Chehalem (11 percent) made our cut. I am a big fan of both producers and love many of their wines. Both of these were light and pure, and while I found them deliciously gulpable, others thought they were too dilute. I will say that at \$36 and \$30 respectively, it's possible to find equally thirst-quenching wines for far less money.

Our favorite was Soter Vineyards North Valley cuvée, made from purchased grapes rather than from Soter's estate vineyard, a deep, earthy, deliciously tangy wine that was our best value at \$29. Right behind was the Soléna Hyland Vineyard from the McMinnville region, with persistent complex flavors of red fruit and minerals and a sleek, almost gossamer structure. We also very much liked the harmonious Les Dijonnais from Brick House in Ribbon Ridge, which gave a slightly richer impression, and the bright, graceful Beaux Frères Willamette Valley.

Two of the more unusual bottles in the top 10 were the Eyrie Vineyards Dundee Hills and Big Table Farm's Willamette Valley. Eyrie is a historic Oregon producer characterized by its pale color and ability to age well for decades. This wine was especially light, yet it would be a mistake to think it is

slight or under ripe. Instead, it was surprisingly complex with subtle floral and mineral flavors. Big Table is an up-and-coming producer that I hope to follow over the years. Its 2011 was fresh and inviting, and very much in the delicate, restrained mode.

While our 20 bottles were a good cross-section of the vintage, they did not include all the top producers. Notably absent were Domaine Drouhin Oregon and J. Christopher, which I've come to very much like over the last few years.

I don't doubt this vintage will be polarizing. Those who do prefer richer, warmer wines may find some of these puzzling, as if they lacked sufficient flesh. Others may be charmed by their unusual delicacy. Either way, 2011 is proof that among wine's best qualities is its power to surprise.

Tasting Report

BEST VALUE

Soter Vineyards, \$29, ***

Willamette Valley North Valley 2011

Pure, lively, deep and tangy, with fresh flavors of earthy red fruit.

Soléna, \$42, ***

McMinnville Hyland Vineyard 2011

Complex and sleek, with an inviting texture and persistent flavors of minerals and red fruit.

Brick House, \$59, ***

Ribbon Ridge Les Dijonnais 2011

Balanced and harmonious, with complex aromas of rich fruits and flowers.

Beaux Frères, \$56, ***

Willamette Valley 2011

Graceful, with bright aromas and flavors of flowers and minerals.

Evening Land, \$27, ** 1/2

Willamette Valley 2011

Tangy and energetic, with complex aromas of red and black fruits.

Bethel Heights, \$54, ** 1/2

Willamette Valley Casteel Reserve 2011

Fragrant, subtle and graceful, with stony, spicy berry flavors.

The Eyrie Vineyards, \$38, ** 1/2

Dundee Hills 2011

Pale yet pure, with subtle flavors of minerals and flowers.

Big Table Farm, \$45, **

Willamette Valley 2011

Fresh, balanced and inviting, with floral aromas.

Erath Vineyard, \$18, **

Oregon 2011

Intense, persistent flavors of earthy red fruit.

St. Innocent, \$34, **

McMinnville Momtazi Vineyard 2011

Gracefully structured with aromas and flavors of red fruit and flowers.