



KATHERINE COLE
Oregonian Wine Columnist

Katherine Cole puts the spotlight on two new pinot noir

Both of their wines have deep Oregon roots

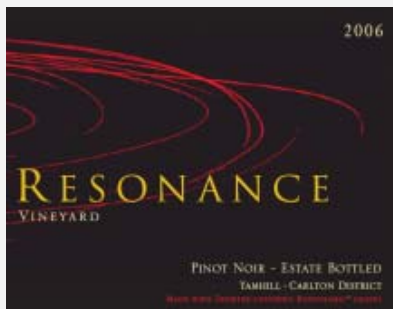
Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Katherine Cole

The Oregonian

The local pinot scene was so simple back when there were just a few wineries and a handful of vineyards in the state. Today it's impossible to keep track of all the newcomers, let alone decide if any of the dozens of fancy pinot noirs that debut each year are worth their increasingly high price tags.

2006 Resonance Vineyard Estate Bottled Yamhill-Carlton District Pinot Noir



Made with certified biodynamic grapes. Alluring aromatics include blackberry and raspberry brambles. Integrated blackberry/raspberry palate with pinpricks of acidity and touches of spice. Soft gauzy mouthfeel with a pleasing touch of grip. Aeration rounds the tannins out and renders the wine more lush and decadent, with notes of chocolate-cherry liqueur. A surprising silk and balanced effort from a novice winemaker.

I recently sat down with a variety of upstart pinots hoping to choose five to write about, but when I tasted them, only two really stood out. Interestingly, both of these wines have deep roots in Oregon wine country -- a connection to the land that most of their colleagues cannot claim.

In the final week of this column's month long focus on local wines, let's take a look at two of the hottest new pinot noir producers in the Willamette Valley.

The kid

Jim Arterberry Maresh was just a few credits shy of graduation at Portland State University when he bolted for the cellar three years ago. "I was sitting in a Korean art history class and just said to myself, 'Man, I need to start making wine. This is crazy!' " he recalls. Now just 24, Arterberry Maresh is easily the youngest winemaker in the state, and possibly the nation.

"I like to have as much fun as possible," he says. "I like to talk a fair amount of trash." And then he proceeds to do just that, bringing boyish verve to the business of winemaking with comments like, "I feel like the Dundee Hills make the best pinot noir that comes out of the New World," and "I don't care about any other fruit outside of the Dundee Hills."

Of course, Arterberry Maresh has access to some of the best fruit in the state. His grandparents, Jim and Loie Maresh, purchased their property back in 1959 and began planting grape vines a decade later, second only to David Lett's Eyrie Vineyards in the Dundee Hills. The youngest vines Maresh uses are as old as he is -- some were even planted by his then-pregnant mother.

Over the years, notable labels such as Archery Summit, Daedalus Cellars, Et Fille, Penner-Ash, Rex Hill, St. Innocent, Scott Paul and Sineann have bottled Maresh fruit; Jim senior also keeps some aside for a house bottling, which he pours at the Maresh Red Barn Tasting Room. Jim and Loie's daughter Martha Maresh -- mother of young Jim -- manages the Maresh Red Hills Vineyard Retreat, also on the property.

But Arterberry Maresh doesn't ride on his family's coattails -- or his own trash talk -- to make great wine. Although he admits he gets unprecedented access to some of the oldest and most revered grapevines in the Willamette Valley, he claims that he pays his family top dollar for the fruit. And while he has dabbled in winemaking for years, he also has put in serious stints assisting top vintners such as Lynn Penner-Ash, Mark Vlossak of St. Innocent and John Paul of Cameron.

Tragically, the man who could have been Jim's greatest mentor -- his father, Fred -- committed suicide in 1990 when his son was just 8. The loss stunned the then-nascent Oregon winemaking community. Fred Arterberry had been a brilliant vintner, making the state's first sparkling wines and pioneering the practice of bottling single-vineyard designates. The Wine Spectator awarded his 1985 Arterberry Red Hills (the former name of Maresh Vineyard) pinot noir 95 points, making it the highest-scoring Oregon pinot for more than two decades.

(I tasted the '85 three years ago and was amazed by its longevity. Unlike so many of its peers that had not stood the test of time, this wine had an intoxicatingly beautiful floral quality to it, reminiscent of peach blossoms and roses, and a brilliant white pepper finish.)

Jim Arterberry Maresh has replicated the typeset from his father's label on his own. Originally designed in 1979, the font looks refreshingly retro, yet classic, today. And it sets this young buck apart from his peers by hinting at the history behind his wine.

Arterberry Maresh's winemaking style is clean, pure and elegant, with an eye to Burgundy rather than California. His strategy is simple: "I concentrate on making the best pinot noir I possibly can and only then do I worry about selling it," he says. Then, with a typically brash flourish, he adds, "That is the secret to making the best pinot noir in Oregon."

Despite the sadness in his past, Arterberry Maresh comes across as happy and well-adjusted (and did I mention confident?). He credits his success to the support he's gotten over the years from his family's network of friends in the Dundee community, and he seems to realize how much his personal history will resonate with the public. "I'm going to make a lot of people proud," he says. "It is a cool story. I'm digging it."

The irreverent sage

Kevin Chambers arguably knows more about vineyard management than anyone else in the Willamette Valley.

But if you ask some folks, the management of his own vineyard and vinification is, well, completely nuts.

Chambers and his wife, Carla, are accomplished multitaskers. They co-own Oregon Vineyard Supply, the largest supplier of equipment and materials to Willamette Valley vineyard managers; as well as Results Partners LLC, a vine-tending firm that manages more than 900 acres of vineyards on 48 different sites throughout the Willamette Valley.

Also, the Chamberses have long been active wine-industry advocates in addition to farming their own Resonance Vineyard just west of Carlton. During the past 18 years, Resonance (formerly Reed & Reynolds) has supplied grapes to prominent labels such as Andrew Rich, King Estate, La Bete, Lemelson and Willamette Valley Vineyards.

The pair recently decided to make their own Resonance wine, thus claiming about half their fruit for their own label (Sineann will continue to make a vineyard-designated Resonance pinot noir). Although he wasn't a seasoned winemaker, Kevin Chambers had enough experience -- and advisers -- in the industry to vinify the first two vintages himself at the Carlton Winemakers Studio.

So what makes Chambers a lunatic? Where do I begin?

For one thing, he dry farms his vines. That means no irrigation, ever. This may be standard practice in Europe, but it's more unusual here -- just imagine getting your garden through the summer without the aid of a sprinkler. "Most sites in the Willamette Valley don't really need irrigation," Chambers shrugs.

For another thing, the vines at Resonance -- old plantings as well as new ones -- grow from their own roots. Never mind that fine-wine grapevines that have not been grafted onto resistant American rootstock are susceptible to phylloxera, a devastating vine-root louse that has crippled wine industries all over the world for more than a century.

Chambers says experience has taught him that self-rooted vines are longer-lived and more drought-tolerant than their grafted peers. They also, he claims, produce better fruit. "I believe plants should be grown on their own roots. I understand why we graft vines on to American rootstocks, but I have seen a lot of confused grapevines," he says.

Then there's the fact that Resonance is certified biodynamic. That's the ber-organic agricultural philosophy that's akin to naturopathic medicine for the landscape. The practice has been derided for its oddball semispiritual practices, but Chambers embraces the whole regime for what he says are scientific reasons: His soil is healthier, he claims, with more beneficial fungi, increased yeast-assimilable nitrogen content, and better air and water penetration than ever before.

Last but not least, the man co-ferments his pinot noir with a bit of the white grape gewrztraminer. Adding a bit of white juice to red might be common practice in parts of Spain and France's Rhone Valley, but it's highly unusual here. "The floral component gave me a more graceful wine," he says.

Chambers is in the process of hiring a winemaker in time for his third harvest, but don't expect the presence of a pro to result in a change of philosophy at Resonance. "I've done a lot of things in life that people thought were crazy," Chambers says. "I've gone from being a lunatic to a prophet. I just had to live long enough."

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