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Willamette Valley Epilogue

William "Rusty" Gaffney

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Willamette Valley Epilogue

Oregonians appear quirky to most Californians, but therein lies their charm. Everyone respects the speed limit, even on freeways, they drive American cars, polite attendants pump your gas, and there is no disdain for old, used and weathered items including cars. Coming from Orange County, California, where everyone is into image and possessing “things,” I find the change when I hit the roads in the Willamette Valley very refreshing.

It makes little sense to drive an expensive car in the Valley as many roads are either unpaved or paved with tire-ripping gravel. This rural, serene, agricultural region with miles and miles of rolling hills and valleys planted with wine grapes, grain, grasses and hazelnut trees, causes your heart rate to slow. Laid back towns dot the landscape, and some seem frozen in time since the 1950s. People are cordial, greet you nicely at stores, restaurants and wineries, and seem genuinely interested in what you have to say. Small, independent businesses are still plentiful in the Valley, although chains and franchises are creeping in.

Street signs are challenging with practically every street preceded by a direction such as “SE,” or “NW.” It is easy to get lost because streets have no sensible pattern in many areas such as the Chehalem Mountains where I become easily disoriented. A GPS may or may not be your best friend. When visiting a winery in Dallas, I met with an actual ferry that transported cars, a few at a time, across the Willamette River. It seems that it would be reasonable to build a short bridge instead, but then, this is Oregon farm country.

Except for the summertime when it can be quite warm, it rains almost daily in the Willamette Valley. This deters visitors and challenges businesses and wineries to remain open and turn a profit in the winter months. Primarily because of this incessant wetness, residents rarely dress up.

The artisan Oregon wines are far from quirky. They are genuine, often sustainably produced, hand crafted in small lots, and frequently offer good value for the price. The camaraderie among winemakers and winery owners is real and pervasive. There are many exciting developments in Pinot Noir winemaking going on including more whole cluster vinification, amphora vinification, and consistent quality despite the vagaries of vintages. Prices for premium Oregon Pinot Noir are slowly escalating, but the quality justifies the rising tide. Premium Oregon vineyard land is still affordable compared to California, and many outsiders, both from our country and Burgundy, are jumping in.

Oregon wine people love to talk about soils and the AVAs of the Willamette Valley are largely characterized by their soils. There are two main types mentioned frequently: (1) red volcanic basalt soils known as Jory from 13 million-year-old lava flows, and (2) brown marine sedimentary soils known as Willakenzie laid down under the ocean flow 20 million years ago. Generalizations can be made regarding flavor and style of Pinot Noir for the AVAs based on the differences in soil type. The AVAs with predominantly Jory soils, like the Dundee Hills, Eola-Amity Hills, and parts of the Chehalem Mountains and McMinnville, tend to produce Pinot Noirs with bright red fruits including cherry and raspberry, and are softly textured with modest tannins. The Pinot Noirs from AVAs with Willakenzie soils like Yamhill-Carlton, Ribbon Ridge, and parts of the Chehalem Mountains and McMinnville, typically offer darker fruit, spice (cola, anise), and wet leaf flavors, and tend to be more tannic and structured. The best way to get a feel for the different AVAs of the Willamette Valley is to visit and taste. All the AVAs are contiguous, and easily explored by car over the course of a few

days.

The last frontier to conquer for the Willamette Valley wineries is the presentation of food pairings on site. The Pacific Northwest has a tremendous bounty of gastronomic riches that pair well with Pinot Noir, including wild mushrooms, salmon, shellfish, cheeses, charcuterie, bacon and hams, and hazelnuts. It is only a matter of time until more Willamette Valley wineries will follow the lead of California and offer food pairings at tasting rooms to enhance the enjoyment of the tasting experience.

To read more about the Willamette Valley vintners, I recommend the book, *Winemakers of the Willamette Valley: Pioneering Vintners from Oregon's Wine Country* (Vivian Perry and John Vincent, paperback, 2013). The book begins with a short history of the Willamette Valley wine region and then profiles 19 prominent winemakers, most of whom did not set out on a life path to be an Oregon vintner. Familiar names are included such as Isabelle Dutarte (De Ponte Cellars), Harry and Wyne Peterson-Nedry (Chehalem), Lynn Penner-Ash (Penner-Ash), Luisa Ponzi (Ponzi Vineyards), Kelley Fox (Scott Paul), and a memorial to respected winemaker Forrest Glenn Klaffke. The three-page foreword written by Harry Peterson-Nedry is worth the price of the book alone. He emphasizes the changing landscape of the Willamette Valley wine experience with the only constant being the passion of the people involved.
