

5-9-2012

## Domaine Drouhin Oregon: New World's Burgundy Presence

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### Recommended Citation

Gaffney, William "Rusty", "Domaine Drouhin Oregon: New World's Burgundy Presence" (2012). *William "Rusty" Gaffney (Prince of Pinot) Collection*. Article. Submission 11.

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## Domaine Drouhin Oregon: New World's Burgundy Presence

Burgundy's first venture into the New World was destined in 1961 when Robert Drouhin, the daring Chairperson of Maison Joseph Drouhin from 1957 to 2003, visited California. He met with Robert Mondavi who suggested investing in California, but Robert Drouhin's interest was in Pinot Noir, a variety that had not yet achieved success in California, and he realized he would have to look elsewhere.

In 1979, Robert Drouhin set up a blind tasting of French Burgundies versus their American Pinot Noir counterparts. At this now famous Gault-Mileu tasting held in Paris, a 1959 Domaine Drouhin Chambolle-Musigny came in first, but David Lett's 1975 The Eyrie Vineyards South Block Reserve Pinot Noir took second. This impressed Robert enough that he looked to Oregon for overseas investment. In 1987, struck by the resemblance of the Willamette Valley to the Côte d'Or, and impressed by the wines produced by Oregon's pioneering Pinot Noir winemakers, Robert initiated the purchase by Maison Joseph Drouhin of 100 acres in the Dundee Hills overlooking the town of Dundee.

Robert chose his daughter, Veronique, part of the fourth generation of the Drouhin family and a 1985 graduate of the University of Dijon, to direct the new project in Oregon, known as Domaine Drouhin Oregon. Veronique oversaw the initial planting of vineyards at Domaine Drouhin Oregon in 1988, and crafted the first three vintages, 1988 to 1990, from purchased grapes. The early wines were well received by the wine press.

More land was purchased and today there are 225 estate acres, 90 of which are densely planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. In 1989, a four-level gravity-fed winery was constructed, the first of its kind in Oregon. Maison Joseph Drouhin had become the first Burgundy house to make wine outside of France and today remains the most significant Burgundy presence in the New World.

Through the years, Veronique-Boss Drouhin (her husband, Michel Boos, is a website designer and together they have three children) has been a long distance winemaker, continuing to live in Beaune, but traveling to Oregon every six weeks or so to oversee the winemaking at Domaine Drouhin Oregon. She also oversees the winemaking style in Beaune.

The Pinot Noirs of Domaine Drouhin Oregon emphasize balance and elegance over extraction and power, and although they can be quite charming upon release, they age magnificently. Veronique likes to say 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 a number of other Oregon Pinot Noirs.

Three Pinot Noirs are produced at Domaine Drouhin Oregon: Willamette Valley Cuvée, Cuvée Laurène, named after Veronique's first daughter, and Cuvée Louise, named after Veronique's youngest daughter. I find a similar resemblance in these three wines to their Burgundy counterparts: Willamette Valley = Village level, Cuvée Laurène = Premier Cru level, and Cuvée Louise = Grand Cru level. This is not strictly the case, and I recently asked Veronique to characterize these three different Pinot Noirs and to explain her stylistic goals for each wine.

**Q:** Maison Joseph Drouhin has a "style," and you have been referred to as the "guardian of that style" in

Burgundy. What is your stylistic goal at Domaine Drouhin Oregon?

**A:** *I grew up tasting and drinking elegant wines, many of them, from Bourgogne appellation to Grand Crus. This is what I have heard since I was a little girl: "Pinot Noir is not a dark colored grape variety. It doesn't naturally give a lot of tannins and when you try to extract too much, it will always be at the expense of finesse." When we harvested our first Pinot Noir grapes in Oregon, my father opened a bottle of Domaine Drouhin Chambolle Musigny Premier Cru Les Baudes to celebrate this special moment, and said, "This is our benchmark, this is what we should aim for." The Chambolle Baudes was extremely delicate and elegant with a beautiful long, silky finish. My stylistic goal in Oregon is to produce very elegant wines. It is more of a challenge in Oregon than in Burgundy. In both regions, the goal is the same but the challenges are different. In Oregon it is pretty easy to produce wine with both good color and structure, but to capture the finesse is more tricky. In Burgundy, it is easy to a natural elegance, but sometimes more challenging to obtain enough color and structure.*

**Q:** The winery's tech notes indicate that Domaine Drouhin Oregon Pinot Noirs are 100% de-stemmed, naturally fermented, and raised in no more than 20% new French oak. Cuvée Laurène and Cuvée Louise receive extra time in barrel and bottle. Can you comment?

**A:** *Yes, the grapes are all de-stemmed. Sometimes in a warmer year I make a cuvée with a small percentage of stems, but in general everything is de-stemmed. The stems tend to give a strong green character to the wine more than the spicy nuances we get with stems in Burgundy. New oak is usually 20%, but with the Cuvée Laurène and Cuvée Louise, it can be up to 25% but never more. Cuvée Laurène and Cuvée Louise stay an extra two months or so in barrel.*

**Q:** What exactly are your goals with Cuvée Laurène and Cuvée Louise? These are both barrel selections, but how is that selection process different for the two cuvées, and how are they assembled to produce different wines? Are there special blocks in the vineyard involved in the selection process? Are there clonal differences?

**A:** *For Cuvée Laurène, I look for a wine with good volume, good length, more structure than the Willamette Valley Cuvée, and above all, much aging potential. The goal for Cuvée Louise would be like looking to produce my "Musigny," the ultimate level of elegance. So the wine may or may not be as structured as Cuvée Laurène, but I look for the best balance, length and finesse. Blocks in the vineyard are an interesting point. It used to be barrel selection only for both wines, but now we see that consistently a couple of vineyard blocks make it to one or the other blend so we start to see our "terroir" show definition. We have a wide variety of clones on the estate, and have found that some do better than others, but the soil and the age of the vines are starting to be the dominant elements in the quality of the grapes.*

**Q:** For the three Domaine Drouhin Oregon cuvées, what would be your recommended drinking windows and how long would the consumer expect to comfortably age them? Also, reference this question as to the 2002, 2004 and 2005 vintages and answer the question for magnum format.

**A:** *Willamette Valley Cuvée: Average time to drink is from release to 8-10 years. 2002 was a great year that produced elegant wines with good aging potential. The wines are still delicious today. 2004 was a later and cooler vintage. The wines have a delicate structure. Drink now to another 5 to 6 years. 2005 was a big year. The wines have very good balance and excellent aging potential. Can be drunk now to another 10 years or more.*

*Cuvée Laurène and Cuvée Louise: Average time to drink is 5 to 25 years. 2002 now to 2022. 2004 now to 2020. 2005 now to 2030.*

*Wine in magnum will age more slowly, so another 5 years can be added to the potential bottle age.*

*As an anecdote, we opened 6 months ago a bottle of the 1988 Pinot Noir, the first Domaine Drouhin Wine. The wine was in excellent shape. It had aged in a graceful, elegant way showing leather, tobacco aromas and still had a good mouth feel. More recently we opened a bottle of 1992 Cuvée Laurène (the first vintage of Cuvée Laurène and the year Laurène, my eldest daughter was born). The wine was simple stunning. Since 1992 was a very warm and early vintage, we did not expect the wine to age so well.*

**Q:** What is the approximate annual case production of the three cuvées?

**A:** Willamette Valley Cuvée: 10,000 to 12,000 cases  
Cuvée Laurène: about 2,500 cases  
Cuvée Louise: about 400 cases

**Q:** Finally, have you learned anything from your experience in Oregon that has impacted your winemaking in Burgundy?

**A:** Yes, the use of racks. I brought this idea back to Burgundy where we still stack the barrels one by one which is a very slow process. We still do it for almost all our wines except our Bourgogne rouge that we can now age in barrels using the space of the winery 10 months of the year. This had a big impact on the quality of our Bourgogne rouge by giving some oak aging to a good proportion of the blend.

I have enjoyed many fine bottles of Domaine Drouhin Pinot Noir, but had never tasted the three cuvées side by side on the same occasion. I decided to raid my cellar and taste a mini-vertical of the three cuvées from the 2002, 2004 and 2005 vintages. The 2004 and 2005 Willamette Valley cuvées were holding nicely, with the 2002 vintage showing the most secondary characters and just past its apogee. The Willamette Valley cuvées are the most forward wines and are intended to be ready for drinking upon release. The Laurène cuvée is the most structured and has the most obvious acidity. The Louise cuvée is a wine apart with submerged acidity, the most refinement and a pleasingly velvet mouth feel. Both Laurène and Louise cuvées are still very young and I would recommend decanting if you plan to drink them now. I was surprised by the intensity of fruit in the Laurène and Louise cuvées in the vintages sampled. I agree with Veronique comment that the 2005 vintage wines, which showed the most tannin, are big and dark fruited without being overripe, and have the longest aging potential of the three vintages sampled.

### 2002 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Willamette Valley Pinot Noir

14.1% alc. · Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Aromas of leather wallet, tea leaf, cigar box and a hint of toast. Lively flavors of spiced black cherries and red berries with a hint of leaf and earth in the background. Medium weighted and light on the palate. The wine is remarkably fresh upon opening for a ten-year-old wine, but over time in the glass it fades some with tannins surfacing that supersede the fruit. Tasted the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle, the wine had faded further and the fruit tasted pruney. Drink up. Good (+).

### 2002 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Laurène Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Initially the nose is muted, but responding nicely to swirling, developing an attractive perfume of fresh black cherries. Moderately rich and attractive flavors of dark red berries, black cherries and black plums with subtle oak unveil themselves slowly in the glass. Ripe, firm tannins, admirable balance, and impressive length on the finish. This wine has several years of fine drinking ahead. Decant if you drink now. Very good (+).

### 2002 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Louise Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir

14.1% alc.. · Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Complex and beguiling with aromas that dance in and out of the glass including black cherries, fennel, balsam and Herbs de Provence. Soft and smooth on the palate with discreetly concentrated flavors of dark red cherries and berries, tea and fresh herbs. The tannins are refined and supple, and the sensuous mouth feel is a real delight. The finish is



extraordinary long with fruit flavors lingering for what seems like a minute. Still beautiful the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle. An exceptional, suave wine that that really grabs your attention.

#### **2004 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Willamette Valley Pinot Noir**

14.1% alc.. · Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Ripe fruit aromas of dark currants, dark red cherry, raisin, tea leaf, spice and exotic wood. Moderately rich and tasty featuring ripe fruit flavors of black raspberries and cherries with a hint of sassafras and chicory. Soft tannins, bright acidity, polished texture and a lively finish. A few more years of life ahead. Good (+).

#### **2004 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Laurène Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir**

14.1% alc.. · Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Initially the nose offers scents of leather, toast and soy, evolving slowly to reveal engaging dark red fruit aromas. Mid weight flavors of dark red and blue fruits, especially dark raspberry, with a slight herbal and soy tone. Well structured with impressive fruit-filled length on the finish. Very good (+).

#### **2004 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Louise Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir**

14.1% alc.. · The aromas really draw you in, offering an engaging perfume of perfectly ripe black cherries, savory herbs and subtle oak. There are not enough superlatives to adequately describe this wine. A few that come to mind are luscious, seamless, velvety, and incredible. Enticing upon opening, the wine becomes silkier and livelier with air. The wine displays remarkable fruit intensity, but is very light on its feet and impeccably balanced. Many years of pleasure ahead. Veronique talks about great wines producing emotion, and this wine elicited a multitude of them for me.

#### **2005 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Willamette Valley Pinot Noir**

13.9% alc.. · Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Still primary aromatic character offering scents of fresh black cherries and dark red berries, with a hint of forest floor and oak. Rich dark red berry core with a subtle smoky, tarry note. Fresh and juicy, polished and silky, with a firm tannic backbone. Doesn't have the finish of the prestige cuvées, but a solid wine that is reflective of a big, hearty vintage. Very good.

#### **2005 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Laurène Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir**

13.9% alc.. · Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Subdued aromas of berries, ripe grapes, cassis, shitake mushroom, oak, and cherries sprinkled with flowers. Richly endowed with a core of ripe dark cherry and black raspberry fruit. A bit linear and unevolved, becoming more expressive over time in the glass. The fruit is still buried in tannin and the wine is rather monolithic now, but the potential is obvious. Be patient on this one. Very good.

#### **2005 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Louise Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir**

13.9% alc.. · Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Subdued, but pleasing aromas of dark red and black berries, with hints of leather, dark chocolate and oak. Fills the mouth with an overreaching core of black grape and black raspberry fruit clothed in polished tannins. Sophisticated and caressing in personality, with a finish that is long and opulent. Crafted for the long term, but hard to ignore now. More giving than the Laurène at this stage. An exceptional wine of uncommon pedigree.

Also tasted:

#### **2008 Domaine Drouhin Oregon Laurène Drouhin Family Estate Dundee Hills Oregon Pinot Noir**

13.9% alc., \$65. · Medium garnet color in the glass. Powerfully aromatic with a perfume of fresh cherry tart and red berry mash, with hints of coffee and sandalwood. Delicious core of dark red fruits that are mouthfilling and rich supported by moderate refined tannins and oak-driven mocha java flavor. Endless echo of scent and fruit on the finish. Needs more time to fully integrate the oak. Relatively elegant for a 2008 vintage Oregon Pinot Noir and more approachable than many. A 2011 PinotFile All-American and deservedly so.

The Domaine Drouhin Oregon Willamette Valley (\$40) and Laurène cuvées (\$65) are widely available in fine wine retail stores and are sold through the winery's website store. The Cuvée Louise (\$80) is very limited and available only through the winery's DDO Direct wine club. All three wines are available in large formats. The Domaine Drouhin Oregon Arthur Chardonnay, named after Veronique's son, was first released in 1996. It is crafted in a moderately restrained and bright, crisp French style, and is among the best Chardonnays produced in Oregon (2,500 cases, \$30). An Édition Limitée Chardonnay (\$55) and an Édition Rosé (\$30) is also offered.

The Tasting Room in the Dundee Hills is open Wednesday through Sunday from 11:00 to 4:00. A Drouhin Experience Winery Tour is available Wednesday through Sunday by reservation which offers the opportunity to taste Pinot Noir from Domaine Drouhin Oregon and Maison Robert Drouhin (\$25). Visit the website at [www.domainedrouhin.com](http://www.domainedrouhin.com) for more information.

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