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Oregon Wine History Project™ Interview Transcript: Myron Redford

Myron Redford
Amity Vineyards

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This interview was conducted with Myron Redford (**MR**) on July 16, 2010 at Amity Vineyards in Amity, Oregon. The primary interviewer was Jeff D. Peterson (**JDP**). Additional support provided by videographers Mark Pederson and Barrett Dahl. The interview was taken in two parts the duration of part one is 52 minutes, 44 seconds; the second part is 36 minutes, 53 seconds.

[00:00] **JDP:** Today we are here interviewing Myron Redford of Amity Vineyards. It's July 16, 2010. Myron, we are focusing primarily on the early period, say the first fifteen years of growing Pinots. So we've talked with the Letts and Dick Erath about some of their experiences and eventually the hope is to keep expanding this project and to keep telling sort of a broader story. What we're really interested in is talking with some of you who were among the first to plant and what that experience was like. Could you maybe tell us a little bit first about your background and then how you wind up in this area planting grapes?

[00:50] **MR:** Okay. I grew up in Seattle. I learned about wine hitchhiking in Europe in 1966 where we hitchhiked from Istanbul to London over a three month period and I got introduced to wine on that trip and discovered how different it was going just a few miles in any direction. And I followed up on that when I came back to Antioch College, where I was attending. And I ended up back in Seattle and started going down to visit California in all my free time.

I was working at the University of Washington and I happened to be in the faculty club with my mother and I heard these guys talking about doing vinifera wine in Washington, this was in 1969. They hadn't even passed the initiative that allowed California wine to be sold in grocery stores up there and I said, "Hey, come on guys, there's no good wine in Washington, what are you talking about?" I didn't even know vinifera would grow up here. And they invited me out. That group was called Associated Vintners and they were the first producers of vinifera in the modern era. And Lloyd Woodburne was the winemaker and I worked with Lloyd from '69 until '73 off and on and got the bug and started buying dairy tanks, and the press, and started home winemaking.

And in 1972 on a trip through Oregon, I followed up on a lead from a friend of my mother's to come visit Jerry and Ann Preston who first put this mobile château—you might think it's a mobile home but it's a mobile château—in. And Jerry bought this land in 1970, and planted the first grapes here in 1971. And in '73, unfortunately for him, he and Ann got divorced. And in '74 he offered me the property and I purchased it, moved down here in I think April of '74.

I spent two years learning how to farm and, as I always like to say, I think I've made every mistake you can make in either grape growing or winemaking until I find another one to make. But when we bought the place in '74, it had gone through a year's divorce; it was in very poor shape. On paper it was about ten acres, but the two acres of Chardonnay had all died and the Pinot noir had about anywhere between 25 and 50 percent dead plants.

As a young man, I think I was twenty-eight, I was full of piss and vinegar and I didn't listen to Jerry who said, "Look, you've got to get this vineyard under control; don't plant any new plants." So in '74 I started planting with greenhouse plants from Charles Coury who unfortunately has died but he was one of the founders along with Dave Lett. There's controversy depending on whether you talk to Dick Erath or Dave Lett's family on who planted the first Pinot noir, but Charles was really big on plants. But like everything Charles did, his wish exceeded his grasp and so the quality of plants were not that great.

[05:04] I didn't know what the hell I was doing. The plants arrived in the middle of summer and so about 50 percent of what we planted in '74 died. Mother Nature is a very brutal taskmaster. There's no boss to call to say, "I'm sorry. I'm sick this morning." There is no fudging on doing a particular viticultural opposition. If you don't do it at the right time, you're screwed. Particularly on weed control.

So those first years were very, very exciting. We eventually managed to get things under control, we expanded the acreage, the last major planting that we did in the early years was I think '76 or '77; we planted that block of Riesling you can see over there. The original Riesling on the flat down there, Jerry put in and planted from '71 and then I put in about three acres of Riesling up on the hill there. Then I planted Chardonnay down here below us with a clone from David Lett's vineyard called the Draper Clone. Then we didn't do any more planting other than replants until '98 when I hired Northwest Vineyard Services and we finally, after '98, so that's twenty-four years of battling the deer, we said, You win and spent a horrendous amount of money putting in a deer fence around here and expanded. We now have about fifteen acres of grapes.

The chainsaw you hear in the background is an expansion, a more recent expansion of the vineyard. My neighbor up the hill who had Bois Joli Vineyard, he planted about three acres, two acres of Riesling and one acre of Coverts. And John Ingram sold that two years ago and the new folks up there wanted to expand their vineyard so I sold them seven acres up on the hill and what you're hearing is the logging crew limbing up the trees that they have felled, getting them ready. So it's apropos that we're having this interview today because that is the most recent expansion that will be taking place up here; not on my vineyard, but on an adjacent vineyard.

(Discussion of the chainsaw crew and noise)

[08:27] **JDP:** Let's then talk a little bit about when you say, "We planted," who is planting at that time in those early years?

[08:33] **MR:** Okay. I moved down here with Janis Checkya (??) who was my, I don't know what the proper term is, girlfriend/partner at the time, and my mother financed the purchase of this vineyard by putting a mortgage on her house. I had a lot of assets, but they were all in Port Townsend, Washington where I was originally going to build my winery and, like so many Washington wineries are doing now, bring my grapes over from Yakima Valley, have a winery in Port Townsend, and make a fortune. Unfortunately, the banks in Port Townsend wouldn't loan on a vineyard in Oregon and the banks in Seattle that would loan to buy a vineyard in Oregon wouldn't accept land in Port Townsend as collateral, even though it was rental property. So my

mom, without me even asking, mortgaged her property and we purchased this and moved down here.

I remember, as I say, I think it was April we were here and it was raining so hard that over in the Riesling on the other side of that hill there, there's a gully and the water was coming down there so fast I thought there was a permanent stream. We were the total urban people. The Oregon industry largely was urban people moving back to the land. You know the Ponzi's, Erath, myself, David Lett attended Davis and Coury did, but the rest of us that started were professionals of some sort that moved back. And now I've lost my train of thought—

[10:35] **JDP:** David Adelshiem talks about a very similar, Next thing you know we're trying to find the plants amongst the weeds and we didn't really understand just kind of what Oregon springs did, and I think he tried to plant in August he said, which is, he said there are many months in which you can plant in Oregon, but August is not one of them.

[10:58] **MR:** Right. Well, I mean, it's completely analogous because Coury's plants I think came in July and like David, when we first bought this, we let the weeds get so high that when we were trying to locate the Chardonnays, I'd say 90—I should have just plowed the whole field because there were less than 10 percent of the plants that were alive. The only way we could find them was Janis would walk down this way and I'd walk this way and we'd find a stake and then we knew the rows were laid out in squares so she would move down this way and I would move this way and we'd say, There's got to be a plant there! And we would take it down, usually it was dead, but sometimes we would find this poor little plant and bring it out.

We didn't have Round Up or any herbicides back then so we were trying to do what would now be considered organically. The way you controlled weeds back then was with something called a French Plow. And what a French Plow is it's a thing that in the fall you go through and it throws earth up against the plants, and it creates a mound because you do it on both sides, so you create this little mound. And then in the spring, but only at a certain critical time, you go through and scrape it away and all the weeds are gone. And when I say a critical time—the thing about the Willamette Valley is that in February you walk out in the mud and it will suck your boots right off and it's so mucky that you can't do anything. And then in the summer it's like concrete; you can bounce a pick ax off. Well, there's this little time in the spring when the moisture has gotten down enough that the dirt will come away but it hasn't gotten so hard.

Well, we missed that point, so we're going along with this French Plow and instead of taking the weeds out, it's just bouncing off. So we had grass—so we bought a little holder tractor that's sort of like it's an articulated four-wheel drive tractor that was small enough to go across the rows. But we didn't start doing it until we were into the summer and even with the rototiller, I mean the rototiller would just bounce off the ground. So I share what David said about the early years of weed control were very traumatic. And then when we got big enough that we put our wires up; of course we could no longer go across with our little rototilling tractor.

So it was a very exciting time and I was very happy in 1976 to get back into the winery. I built this winery here in 1976 with a carpenter friend of mine who was running my farm up in Port Townsend, and supposedly getting the barn ready for a winery. We had two high school kids

down here and myself, and the three of us built that first building. And we got the building built and all the winery equipment and the winery opened for less than fifteen thousand dollars.

[15:00] The roof was aluminum from a chicken shed that you can sort of see down there. There's a house, a couple buildings down there, and they were done with chickens and they said, Oh, you can have the roof for free. So we put the aluminum roof on. Of course, the one problem with it is it was used aluminum so even though we pulled out all the nails and everything, occasionally you wouldn't put the new nail up here in exactly the same place that it had been and so we spent the next couple of years going around with scoops of tar, trying to find the leaks up in the roof until we were able to afford a new roof.

One of the things that had happened that was really advantageous to the start of the Oregon industry was that Oregon, the Willamette Valley was known for Blue Lake pole beans. This used to be one of the major crops here and for pole beans you had to have posts and wire. Well, the labor situation by the late sixties was already getting so expensive that handpicking pole beans was becoming uneconomical and Oregon State [University] came out with a new thing called a bush bean that was machine-harvested. Well that came in just as our industry was starting, so all of us that you mentioned, Erath, Lett, you know, particularly all of us that were on short budgets, went out and bought these pole bean stakes sometimes for a half-cent, sometimes a cent, sometimes they just gave them to us. And then the wire, this beautiful trellis wire, was a half-cent a pound or something.

It was an incredible transition. So I and many other people were out there with fifty-five gallon drums filled with diesel fuel and penta. This was back before we realized what things like penta would do to you. Soaking those stakes to keep them from rotting and then planting them. So that was a big subsidy to the start of the Oregon industry.

The other thing that was happening is the dairy industry in Oregon and Washington was up-scaling, so all the small 200, 300, 600, even 1,000 gallon dairy tanks that they were using were being taken out in place of 5,000, 10,000. So you could buy these dairy tanks sometimes for fifty cents a gallon. Stainless steel, jacketed, perfect fermentors. So we bought a lot of those and I know that for a long time Ponzi and a lot of the other smaller people used them too. So those were two of the things that really helped us out in those early years from that point of view.

[18:25] **JDP:** Yeah. It sounds like there were a lot of—Susan Sokol Blosser mentioned the beans also and there was a lot of this sense of trying to take whatever you could find near by and I'm not sure I have run into any of the early ones who have said that they had the deep pockets to not do that so far, but it seems like there was a network there of you all trying to—

[18:50] **MR:** The early industry was a wonderful place to be because, I mean, we all hung together. Ponzi and I for probably until, oh probably until the early eighties, maybe as late as '85 shared a filter, a labeling machine, and we would transport them the almost forty miles back and forth because neither of us could afford to buy the machines. So we bought them together and then shared them. The only person in the early days that had deep pockets was Tualatin Vineyards. Bill Fuller was an actual winemaker who had done a lot of winemaking in California and he was hired, you'll have to check with Bill for his partner's name, I can't remember

because he was largely silent. He put a lot of money into Tualatin Vineyards. Not only the winery, but the vineyard.

[20:00] And he created one of the early controversies in the state and prompted us to move to our labeling regulations, which were the first consumer friendly, and basically still are the only statewide extensive labeling regulations.

What happened was back then the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms did not require an Appellation of Origins on wines, so you could just make a wine and put “Produced and Bottled by Tualatin Vineyards.” So Bill’s partner was a banker, and of course bankers like to begin to get a return on their investment, and the vineyard was young so Bill, being an experienced winemaker, went up to Washington as almost everybody in the industry did in the early years because we didn’t have enough grapes down here. But he bought, I can’t remember whether he bought anything from California, but he bought either grapes or wine, made it, and put it out with no appellation on it and it said, “Produced and Bottled by Tualatin.” Any consumer picking it up would have thought it was an Oregon wine.

Well, you've got to remember again that we were all ex-consumers and we still had a consumer not a producer mentality because I don't think anybody except for Fuller didn't have another job supporting it. I worked at the unemployment office for a temp because I had to convince the supervisor that somebody with my with my academic credentials and so forth—she was very suspicious that I was going for this minimum wage job and I had to explain to her that I was at a vineyard and I needed a job that I could go to my boss and say, “It’s harvest time, it’s pruning time, it’s anything time; I need time off.” And working for the unemployment office, you had that flexibility. Ponzi was a professor, Erath in the early days worked as an aircraft engineer, Oaknolar (??) on Fullsteft (??) was an aircraft people so everybody had a day job and had to work it and now I’ve lost the point. Why was I talking about my day jobs?

[22:56] **JDP:** We were talking about the consumer mentality.

[23:00] **MR:** Oh! The consumer mentality. Right, right, right, right. Ok, so, we were just outraged that Tualatin had done this and Bill’s just saying, “Hey guys, we’re trying to make a living too, we’re just complying with the regulations.” So David Adelsheim, David Lett, myself, a whole bunch of us got together and started formulating the first things, I think we passed them in 1978. And the other thing was that at that time the Bureau of—BATF, allowed you to call wine by its varietal name with only 50 percent of the grapes. And we had another to-da with a Washington Winery, Preston Vineyards that entered a Pinot noir at the Hillsboro judging, which only lasted a few years, and he won top prize. The reason he won top prize was because the wine was probably half cab; it made this big, black thing. And so, again, when we passed the regulations, we said it had to be 90 percent of the varietal, it had to have an appellation of origin on it, you couldn’t use any European place names or any other that had geographical significance. So there was no Oregon Burgundy, there was no Oregon Chablis, there was no Oregon Rhine Wine, there was no Johannesburg Riesling. We said that every grape variety had to have its true botanical name and only one name.

[25:00] This sort of came back to haunt us a little. We were all French oriented, so all of our names were French. And then when Pinot Grigio became the big grape, we were sticking with Pinot gris and we did that until, I guess it's been a year ago, two years ago, when they allowed Pinot Grigio. But it actually worked out really good for the industry because—despite the amount of time it took us to convince consumers that Pinot gris (and Pinot Grigio) were the same thing. It was basically a stylistic difference because Oregon Pinot gris tended to be more full bodied, richer, and Pinot Grigio, as you know, is just sort of a quaffing wine. And the Italians were able to make it, and the Californians followed that very heavy crops, so you had just a very light-quaffing thing where as ours was a quote-unquote “more serious” wine. So that was really a major, major event.

One of the other really significant things that I remember in the early years—and I'm trying to remember whether it was '77, '78, somewhere in there—the University of California Davis had a weekend seminar called Winemaking for Small Wineries, or something like that for introduction, and I swear that three quarters of the industry was down there. I don't think Lett or Coury or Fuller came down because they were professionally trained, but the rest of us had learned our winemaking either as amateurs or like myself, working at another winery. And it was just this thing where in one room there would be all these people, for example Daryl Sattui who is now a multi-millionaire, presented a paper at that seminar on how to start a winery on five thousand dollars and I told Darrell I started mine on fifteen and he said, “You know, that's really expensive, Redford.”

And Charles Coury—because Coury burned out and left the industry many years ago, David Lett became Papa Pinot, and was sort of regarded as sort of the main focus. But in reality, in the early years, Charles Coury was a much more potent influence because Chuck taught courses at—I can't remember whether it was Portland State or something, but he taught winemaking and viticultural classes for several years. He made a major, major contribution to that. And I can remember, he was a brilliant man but he had a caustic way about him, and I remember one poor student: Chuck was giving some talk about viticulture, which was his specialty, and the student asked a question and Chuck is sitting there sucking on a cigarette, looking around, and then he turns back and says, “That's the dumbest effing question I have ever heard.” This poor person is trying to hide down in the thing, but he used to do that.

Another thing about those early days that helped us as an industry is we had a meeting once a month at the Tualatin fire hall because it was the cheapest building we could rent, and we could have our meetings. I remember, it must have been after 1980, yeah, I think probably closer to '85, we had a momentous occasion at our meeting: it was the first time that we had served Oregon wine at our own meeting. The reason for this was that back in the beginning, Erath would produce thirty cases of some Pinot, Lett would produce one hundred cases, Ponzi might produce fifty cases and they were gone. In our point of view, they were so expensive at three or four dollars a bottle that the budget of the Oregon Wine Growers Association was so small we couldn't afford it. So we always drank California jug wine at our meetings. Then we would go across the street to a fish and chip bar and eat fish and chips and drink beer and talk until way late at night. Coury was always there.

[30:21] But that again, we were all together and we would have these meetings and then there was sort of this schism in the industry. I don't know whether anybody else has talked about this, but originally when Ponzi and Lett and Erath were here, the group in Roseburg started the Oregon Wine Growers Association and of course these guys joined it because it was the only show in town. But what they found is that a guy named Paul Bjelland was very influential in it. Basically it was a Let's-get-together-and-drink-wine group and the group up here in the North Alley was, we were hungry for technology. We wanted—at our meetings we always had a technical program.

So before I came, the Northern group broke away and formed the Oregon Wine Growers Council, which we had our meetings, and we were very oriented and this created sort of a schism between the Roseburg and we had Frank—Valley View Vineyards was the only one at that time in the Rogue Valley. It took a long time, I think it was more than ten years before there was enough. Scott Henry started his operation down there. Scott was the—again, have you heard the term *Scott Henry Trellis System*? It's worldwide. Scott Henry developed that and he wanted technology too and gradually we finally put the two organizations back together and Paul Bjelland sort of closed his winery.

Gotta tell you another thing about Paul Bjelland. The OLCC, when we went to put these labeling regulations in, in 1978 they said, You can't just have a majority, you have to have unanimous consent of all wineries—not vineyards, thank God. All wineries in the state had to agree to these regulations. Paul Bjelland had been making Johannesburg Riesling, and he refused to change the name, so he was grandfathered in with the provision that the name was only as long as he personally was in charge of the winery and if he sold it or took in investors, it ended. And I think by, I can't remember when Paul went out of business but it wasn't too long ago, and there was some other deals that were made.

Jason Lett says that my memory is very bad, but I distinctly remember one of those meetings where people were arguing what was an estate vineyard. The problem we had was that in Europe we have the château system where the château is here and all the grapes are around it. And *Estate Bottle* came to mean “very high quality” because the vineyard was controlled. Well, we got here and all of us would have qualified for that except for David Lett because David Lett had bought what is still his winery, which was an old turkey processing in McMinnville and his vineyard was in Dundee. And he argued, which most of us agreed with his argument that, Wait a minute guys, I'm as much estate as you are, Redford, or you are, Ponzi, in the sense that all my grapes are farmed by me and under my control. They just don't happen to be around my winery because there's not too many vineyards in downtown McMinnville.

[35:00] So the argument started was a question of, ok, how far away could the vineyard be from the winery and still call it an estate. And I don't remember why, but we put in a number. And the number was put in to accommodate David. Eventually, I think the number was dropped. And the important thing was that it had to be under the control, under the viticultural control, so that if for example—

Well, I'll give you an example for me: the Bois Joli up here. For the first several years, John farmed it himself and we put it on the label as Bois Joli. Well, as he got older and retired, he

said, “Myron, I don’t want to spend all my time farming. You just take over this vineyard. You farm it and if you make a profit, that’s fine and if you don’t, that’s your problem. And you give me a case of each of the varietals every year.” So that was part of our estate until, well this year it is going to change because they—the new owners took over and did that. So that was the thing. But it’s an interesting historical note if you go back and look at the original regulations. I can’t remember how many miles it was but some people wanted a lot more miles so that they could, you know, and David didn’t want his—

It was just one of those kind of things. But in general we were, and still are, amazing people. From any other growing regions in the world when they come to Oregon, they are just blown away at the level of cooperation. And that came out of these early days. We always tried to help each other, and try and look out, and hang together or all hang separately. That’s just sort of continued, even after the, what I call the Napafication of Oregon started. Which I think the real, the first serious money invested that was for sort of, for back then we thought of it as big money coming in to the industry, was Rex Hill.

Paul Hart had an investment group that bought an old prune drier and I still remember the dance they had in there, they cleaned out the prune drier and they invited everybody in. And we had a big barn dance up in this old prune drier before they modified down to the winery. But the kind of money that Paul put in, I don’t know, it might have been a few hundred thousand dollars, at that time in the industry was incredible. Then Susan Sokol Blosser, Susan and Bill Blosser at that time, hired Grey, the guy that designed Sallshein (??) to put in that very pretty tasting room of ours and we all thought that was a lot. And then Drouhin comes in and builds this incredible thing.

But that was just sort of little things. The real, I want to move to Oregon and have a winery and I’ve got a lot of money, and so forth didn’t start until I’d say ’94. So now you have an industry that has changed in the sense that now the vast majority of wineries are not owner operated. They are owned by somebody and the winemakers are a hired person that is not the owner. In fact, I’m that way now. I’m semi-retired; I went halftime. Darcy Pendergrass my winemaker took over. She’s been with me for ten years, but in 2005 and 2007 was her first vintage that basically she did all her own.

[40:00] But the interesting thing is that the same spirit is happening among the Cellar Rats, we call them. The young people that don’t have a penny to their names, who are coming and working in the wineries, are starting to try and put a dime here and there, and talk to their owners to get permission to make a little wine under their own label, and buy a few grapes and do that. The best example is Ransom Wine and Spirits, Tad Seestedt, who used to be my cellar master; he now has a distillery and winery. I can remember when he showed up, he just, you know, didn’t know about wine, just was kind of interested, just started working in the industry, then came over here.

There are a lot of kids like that now, well young adults that are, what for me is the exciting part of the industry because frankly, and you don’t have to edit this out, but between you and me, the people that want to be part of the wine scene, and have money are putting up palatial things is not my cup of tea. The economic down turn, I think, has taken care of that for quite some time.

But the real passion, the real soul of the industry is these younger people who are trying to find a way to get into the wine business just like all of us did in the beginning—you know, working, putting all your savings in. Tad financed this whole operation during that period when they'd mail you ten credit cards a week, you remember that period and now you can—He just kept getting all these credit cards and he would run one up and then pick up another credit card. He'd transfer the balance and I remember, it must have been about five years ago, maybe a little longer, he told me he had finally paid off all his credit cards and we went out and had a beer to celebrate.

[42:26] One other thing that I need to talk about because on Sunday I'll be going down to the Steamboat Pinot Noir Conference. Has anybody talked to you about that yet? This is probably the most influential meeting group in terms of improving the quality of Pinot noir worldwide.

What happened is back in 1980, Stephen Cary, who is now the winemaker over at Yamhill Valley Vineyards, and is somebody you should interview, was meeting with some friends of his, several restaurateurs and a distributor and they were drinking a Burgundy and talking and one of them said, "You know, we should get a group of winemakers together from Oregon and California, and we should all meet, and drink Burgundy and our local Pinots, and figure out how to make them better." Then the next year I was fortunate to be invited and we started out—We were going to rotate between Oregon one year and California one year, back and forth.

The first year we had it down at the Steamboat Inn on the Umpqua River. It was really, very successful but there was like ten of us. There was Micrage (??), Mumford (??), Mikasa (??)—his name just went out of my head. I'll think of it. Anyways, there were three or four Californians, and three or four or five or six Oregon wineries. I think our first tasting was '79 Pinots. Back then, Pinots, particularly from California, were almost brown because everybody believed you had to get the grapes ripe and there was this sort of stupid natural-is-better idea and so you just did that.

[45:12] Well, one of the things that I still remember is one of the meetings when the Californians came up, this could be a couple years later, and they had this revolutionary idea that you waited to get flavor development, no matter what the sugar was, no matter what the pH was. You went for flavor and then when you brought the grapes into the crusher, you hit them with tartaric acid. You just poured tartaric acid in to drop the pH down, to preserve the color, because at a pH of four, only about 10 percent of the red spectrum pigments are visible to the human eye. So even if something is very red, it looks brown. If you ever want to try it just take a really brown looking wine, pour a little sulfuric acid in it and boom! It will turn almost purple. So they would push the pH down and preserve the color and bring the balance back into the wine.

This was a revolutionary idea. I mean, the fact that we are a cool climate, there are a lot of areas in Oregon that have very warm vineyard sites and some of the early Oregon Pinots from those warmer sites were like the California ones. They were big and blousy and so forth.

A side note, Bill Fuller, our nemesis up there at Tualatin produced a Pinot noir from the 1980 vintage and a Chardonnay and brought them to a technical seminar and we tore them to pieces,

all the winemakers. Oh! The pH is too high! This is fat! This is flabby! Blah, blah, blah. Sent it over to England and he won. It's the only time an Oregon winemaker has ever done it. He won the Queen's Prize for the best Pinot in the world and the best Chardonnay in the world. Winemakers' opinions and consumer judges are quite different.

But anyways, these things started to grow and then the IPNC—I'm trying to remember the first year the IPNC—

[47:49] **JDP:** Next year is the twenty-fifth anniversary.

[47:52] **MR:** Twenty-fifth anniversary. So that's, 1990—No, it has to be '85, right?

[48:03] **JDP:** Eighty-six, yeah.

[48:05] **MR:** Ok. When the—so this little group kept meeting at Steamboat and we were supposed to go down, the next year we went down to California, just to finish this story, we met at Mike Richmond's house in Carneros. The problem was we had all of our seminars and tastings and then as soon as lunch arrived, all the Californians got in their cars and went back to work and there was none of the interaction. So the next year we had it up at Steamboat.

Then the next year we were supposed to have it at Lake Tahoe. Well, Jim Olsen, that's the guy I was trying to remember, he was one of the early producers in California Pinot. Jim was supposed to reserve this resort on Lake Tahoe. Well, Jim had many virtues but attention to detail was not one of them. So we're about ready to have the conference within less than a month and Steve Cary calls Jim and says, "We've got to send out the invitations. Which resort and how much is it going to cost?" Oh! Well, he calls and by then the resort has been booked. So we went back down to Mike Richmond's house again. We had a very unsatisfactory—we had a wonderful time at Richmond's house, we had good tastings, but the same thing: in the evening most of the guys were gone and at lunch.

So after that, the group voted and it became the Steamboat Pinot Noir Conference. And then when the IPNC started in '85 or '86, the advantage for us was that international winemakers were invited and they were basically financed by IPNC to come, Burgundians particularly. In those early years from '85 to '95 we would have sometimes three or four young Burgundian winemakers at Steamboat too. So we had the French, we had the Australians, we had the New Zealanders, we've got people from Germany, we've got a young Swiss winemaker who has been coming the last five years. We are so proud of him; the quality of his Pinot noir has gone from god-awful to really, very good.

And so that convergence of all these young winemakers and people from all these new growing regions, ideas that were developing in both viticulture and enology were transferred and the wines were tasted from all around the world, always totally blind. We didn't allow any press in so that winemakers could get up and say—I mean, French winemakers could get up and say—well, everything I am going to tell you is illegal in France, so keep it under your hat, but the laws in France are not beneficial to making great wine; they sometimes are against it. The Californians were the same way. They would say—well, the California thing says you can't add

sugar to your wine and adding water I think was illegal in California back then. But both of them in many cases were necessary to making good wine. Not trying to increase your profit margin or anything like that but just making a good wine. If you leave your grapes on for a long time to go for flavor, then in many cases the alcohols are crazy because the bricks get too high. And that's, as we say at the thing, then we invite Jesus to walk across the tank. Or as people say, Hey George, how many Jesus units did you have to use on this wine?

[52:28] **JDP:** So how is that kind of in terms of your philosophy? I've talked with some of the different folks in terms of how—What is it that you're looking for in your wines?

End of Part I

[00:15] **JDP:** So, one of the questions I want to ask you, you've sort of talked about the different ways of making wine and one of the questions I've asked is, what is your view of, you know, what is your philosophy? What kinds of wines are you looking to make?

[00:31] **MR:** Well, I am an outlier in the industry. I, starting in 1988, felt that New Oak was becoming the ketchup of the wine world. It's just like ketchup: it's sweet, it adds a nice flavor to a lot of things, but it became, and this was a long time ago in my opinion, it was becoming the major flavor component in wine and it's only gotten worse.

So in 1988 I decided to take the radical position of saying that I would make all my wines with no New Oak, neutral barrels. I did that up until Darcy took over in 2007. Since I had trained her for ten years she said, "All my colleagues, all my young colleagues, all my friends all know how to use barrels and I don't know how to use barrels so you need to let me do it." So I allowed her to buy ten barrels.

But I find it particularly ironic that we call ourselves, and New Zealand, and Australia, and Chile, and South Africa the New World of Winemaking, but all those areas are all tied to forests in France. If you take the top rated Pinot noirs out of Oregon, and I can tick them off: Beaux Frères, Bergstrom, Domaine Serene, Archery Summit—that's a good list. They're all using more than 50 percent New Oak; several of them using 100 percent New Oak—Domaine Serene, Bergstrom, Beaux Frères—on their wines. And a lot of the other, next-tier people, Lynn Penner-Ash—

And it is a coincidence; it is an irony of all ironies that Darcy started using New Oak in 2007. Her 2007s, even with ten barrels, some of the small lots had 25 percent, one of them had, that we haven't released, is over 50 percent. And all of those wines got the highest ratings that my Pinots have got from Parker, the *Wine Enthusiast*, the *Wine Spectator*, and Stephen Tanzer; the four big ones. She got scores over ninety. I was at that event with you the other night and Steve Doerner was there—there's another person who uses a lot of New Oak, makes nice wines, Bethel Heights.

I can't remember how we got on the topic of barrels or something but I said, "Steve, I've become a whore like the rest of you. I've turned the winery over to Darcy, and she's using New Oak just like the rest of you." And Steve looked at me and he said, "Yeah, but you've been getting the

great scores now, haven't you?" And that right there is the indictment, in my opinion. The scores are going to the barrels more than to the wine.

There was a Turkish story: they have a guy called Nasreddin hodja who was an itinerant imam who they say used to ride around backwards on a donkey. And they tell these stories, sort of folk stories. One of them is that Nasreddin hodja showed up at a restaurant dressed in his working clothes and asked to come in and eat. They barely let him in, put him at the table next to the kitchen; he couldn't get any service. So halfway through the meal, he got up and went home, put on his finest robes, and came back and walked in. The owner came over, "Sir! Here, you have our best table. Sit down." The service, everything. The first dish came, a big bowl of soup. He grabbed his coat and he stuck it into the soup. They were all horrified, What're you doing? He said, "Well obviously I have to feed my clothes because that is what you are honoring. You aren't honoring me, you are honoring my clothes."

And for me, you aren't honoring the flavor, you're not honoring terroir, you're honoring a flavoring agent. And oak is a very fine flavoring agent, and I will freely admit that in some times it will make a wine that is more hedonistically pleasurable, but that doesn't alter the fact that the New World industry is like a drug addict. It has to have their fix from France. If the French—if the wine industry recession continues and the French start suffering badly, I predict that they will start cutting off the export of their barrels and suddenly Domaine Serene won't be able to buy barrels and the Domaine Serene taste, the Beaux Frères taste, will be gone.

I'm sorry, I'm getting very passionate about this, but, to me, to have people go and talk about terroir and then you can't hardly taste anything past the oak. I mean you can taste the others but the dominant aroma when you are using 100 percent New, sometimes it'll integrate in but usually people are just going to go, I love it! And I say, "Yeah, sure you love it because—" If I made a Pinot noir and I added residual sugar to it, I would be outcast in the industry. But if I buy a new barrel which has all sorts of vanillin and wood sugars that are soluble in alcohol that go in and soften up the wine and make it round everything, I am praised as a great winemaker.

I regret that before I finished I didn't take a wine that was a little thin and needed something and just add some sugar to it at a very low level so it's not discernable. I'm willing to bet that I would have started winning prizes too because it would have been soft and round and as somebody who knows how to do that very well with white wines, I think I could have done it. So I have to say, I'm an outlander. Nobody followed my lead. My own winemaker isn't following my lead.

[09:36] **JDP:** But talk about that notion of terroir then for you. You know, how—what is that sense?

[09:45] **MR:** "If you go—Shea Vineyards sells to twenty different winemakers. It's a very prestigious site, very warm site. If you tried to discern the terroir and you compared all these winemakers with all that oak, the different levels of oak that they're using, it's almost impossible. I remember Al McDonald from Seven Springs who sold to a lot of people. He went in to this tasting and he said, "I expected to be able to see the terroir of Seven Springs showing through." He said, "All I saw is how Adelsheim made the wine, how Bethel Heights made the wine." The stamp of the winemaker was stronger than the influence of the vineyard. And if I go

to Domaine Serene when Tony was there and if you have to use New Oak, I don't know the new woman, but when Tony was there and if you had to use New Oak, he did it better than most people because the problem with using New Oak is you have to use the right kind of New Oak and too many people—

But anyway, back to the important thing. If I went up and tasted with Tony where the winemaking and barrel use was controlled, then I could taste terroir because the same winemaker is there and the barrel influence is common and therefore the differences show the terroir. At my place, when we were using neutral barrels, the terroir just stands out because it's the only—it is *the* factor that makes my Sunnyside Pinot noir taste different than my Scout Pinot noir. Sunnyside is South Salem Hills, planted in 1970, so probably some of the oldest vines in the place, volcanic jory soil, red soil. Scout Vineyards, which is now Bass Hill is right over there in those range of hills and it is sedimentary uplift soil. So the wines are night and day different. Night and day.

And I can take you through ten years of tastings and the terroir speaks to you. Anybody can see it and I think that now that the industry is getting older, although most of us started planted on our own roots. Other than my vineyard, and Sunnyside, and other isolated vineyards, the ones in the Dundee hills are all being wiped out by phylloxera, so they're being replanted. So they're not as—I mean these are thirty—Nineteen seventy-one, so thirty-nine—

[13:07] **JDP:** So you didn't have to replant because of the phylloxera?

[13:14] **MR:** Yeah, because we're isolated, and we're very careful. When phylloxera was discovered, if you went around in Oregon and the harvest after that, it was like an armed camp. There were big signs on gates, people had locks on their gates, they had washbasins for your feet with Clorox in them. After harvest the gates were open, everything was gone. So, no, we were just lucky basically.

I think terroir is important. In terms of styles of my wines, forgetting about the oak issue, when I was younger I made much more tannic wines. Even before I stopped using oak barrels I used them very judiciously because I didn't have any money to put a lot of money into it. But after '88 it was not an economic decision, but a culture one. I tended to make wines that were quite tannic because I tended to hold my wines back. Sometimes I would release a wine that had five years in the bottle and the tannins would start to mellow and they would provide the long aging in the wines.

[15:00] Now as I've gotten older, I guess 1996 I made a big transition towards more elegant, and sweeter wines. That's sort of my style shift now. I like Mussini; I like it much better than Chambertin and Burgundy, to give you a contrast. I want to make Chris Rumié—Christopher Rumié is a master of making wines. He uses some chambe New Oak also but his wines are round and sweet.

The other big influence on me in terms of my style was Dick Erath in the younger days because I used to think that David Lett's wines had great structure but they were too austere. And Dick's needed a little more structure but they had the fleshiness about them. And I wanted to make

something that sort of combined those two. And that's an interesting thing about terroir, is that the early industry was probably 90 percent on volcanic soils, Jory, Nekiah, and then the Willakenzie, the sedimentary soils started getting planted up around Carlton and Ribbon Ridge and so forth. And sedimentary soils, with my limited experience with them from Scout and now I have another one, make a softer, more early maturing, rounder, more feminine wine by their nature.

And I don't know what the chemical thing is, but I think that is a huge development. We don't have, except for one geologist—there is no limestone in the Willamette Valley, except for one geologist who stated in her book that there was some limestone at the south end of the Eola Hills. I don't think anybody has ever found it. But I think the sedimentary soil versus the volcanic soil makes a difference. But that was how I define my style as a young winemaker was to combine those.

The other thing that Dick told me, and that I've felt is really good, is he said, "Pinot ages better in the bottle than in the barrel." He was always an advocate of short barrel aging—under a year, max—and a longer time in the bottle. So that's something that I have done. I think I've made one wine that was eighteen months in the barrel, from a fairly tannic year.

So that's my style, and I basically believe that wine is a hedonistic beverage; it's supposed to give us pleasure. And the worst thing that ever happened to the wine world was *snobbus erectus* appearing on the thing. These wine snobs who make people feel that they shouldn't drink Riesling for example.

Let me tell you a little story. When this industry started, we were all focused on Pinot noir. Then we started selling our wine and low and behold, in the 19—early seventies, the American consumer had a sweeter tooth than Pinot noir so pretty soon we found that if we wanted to keep the doors open, we had to make some Riesling.

[20:00] So from the early seventies up probably to maybe the early eighties, maybe up to '85, if you went anywhere in the Northwest, Riesling was the king white grape and it was also the king grape. I mean it was just everywhere. Well if you left Oregon and Washington and went to California or anywhere else, and you said, "I'd like a Riesling," by the early eighties people would look at you like you had two heads. You still drink Riesling? That's a beginner's wine! Doesn't matter that it makes some of the famous wines in the world and it's one of the most versatile grapes.

So what happened was that in California the Chardonnay craze had hit and suddenly people were wanting to have a glass of Chardonnay instead of just a glass of white wine but they still had a sweet tooth. So what would happen is they would go to their restaurant or wine bar and say, I'd like some Riesling, and they'd get put down for it. So then they'd say, What am I supposed to drink? You're supposed to drink Chardonnay. And then they would try this Chardonnay and they were oaky and stuff and they didn't like that. I forget the winemaker's name—I was on a panel with him about three years ago and he found my analysis amusing. But what Kendall-Jackson did was they simply left residual sugar in their Chardonnay. They had as much residual sugar in their Chardonnay as I had in my Rieslings.

Well suddenly everybody was happy. The Riesling drinker could suddenly drink Chardonnay, the employee didn't have his boss, "You brought me a bottle of Riesling? You think I'm an amateur drinker? I'm a real drinker!"

So Kendall-Jackson just took off. And the wine judges, these great sophisticates started giving it gold medals all over the place because of course it tasted wonderful because of the oak and everything had the flavor and then they had that residual sugar balancing everything else out. So what we ended up with in the United States was this massive movement to residual sugar Chardonnay.

That was basically because of the goddamn wine snobs. They're basically people that make people embarrassed to drink what they like to drink. They killed Rosé too. I mean it's finally coming back, but when I made my first Rosé it was in 19—was in 2001 and I did it because I went down to Melbourne to the Cool Climate Viticulture Conference expecting to love Cabernet, Shiraz, and Merlot from Australia and instead I got to Melbourne in the middle of January, which is their summer, and there was Rosé everywhere and dry Rieslings and that's what I came back loving from there.

So I made a wine and I called it Dry Rosé and I didn't spend anything on the label, it was practically black and white. And everybody that came into the tasting room that wanted to try Pinot had to try the Rosé. I didn't care whether they spit it out, I didn't care whether they bought it, if they didn't try it, I wouldn't let them taste the Pinot. What I found was that a huge number would go, It's dry! And I'd say, "Yeah, it says Dry Rosé." You mean Rosé can be dry?

And since 2001, the movement toward introducing Rosé into American society has started to work. We're starting to learn what wonderful wines go in and try our shindig in there. Right now our Rosé, Darcy made it from Pinot gris and it's just incredible, it's just delightful. I serve it to sophisticates and unsophisticates and everybody likes it. But again, there's the wine snobs telling people that what they're drinking is not—You know, you shouldn't drink that, that's not real wine. I have no tolerance for it.

[25:00] I've got to tell you one more story. I belong to a group called S.N.O.B, which is the Society of North Oregon Bibbers. And they were—it was like taking and distilling the essence of a snob into S.N.O.B. These guys were what I call Label Drinkers. They were all very wealthy and they could afford to buy anything they wanted, and what they wanted to buy was wines that would impress their friends, the other people in the group, and so forth. So, of course they bought all the big name French things and everything. To get them to drink Oregon Pinot, up until Parker endorsed it, finally—some of them would have an occasional thing, but having even an Archery Summit wine in their cellar, Oh, I don't drink Oregon Pinot; I drink Burgundy. So they would buy Burgundies at five times the price that weren't half as good as what Oregon had.

So anyway, I was asked to conduct a Sauternes tasting because I had bought with a friend of mine all of the 1975 Sauternes on early release. So we had almost every major and some of the minor Sauternes. So they said, Myron, you can do the tasting. I said, "Okay, but here's the rule:

it's blind." Ah! You can't taste sauterne blind! "Well, why not?" Because Yquem is going to knock them all to hell and you don't need it blind! I said, "Let's just see what happens."

So we did the tastings blind. Guess where Miss Yquem came in? It wasn't first, it wasn't second, it was third, or maybe fourth. Everybody voted when it was blind; everybody described all the wines in their blind. When we started pulling off the papers you could just see the looks on these guys' faces. When we got to Yquem, they were all just like this. But within a half an hour everyone was back over around the Yquem tasting saying, Oh, it's improved so much with the bottle being open. I don't know why I would have voted the other way; it's clearly the favorite!

And that's it in a nutshell. I—another word for wine snobs is *label drinkers*. They, they're just back to that Turkish thing. They're just looking at the clothes, they're not looking at what's in the bottle.

[28:16] **JDP:** That kind of reminds me. I had a daughter who would go for the appearance of the shoes, and when she was little we came up with a trick which was she couldn't look at the shoes, she had to close her eyes and put them on and feel how they felt because then she would buy these shoes and wouldn't wear them because they hurt, but she liked the look of them. And it's almost like that's some of the problem is that it's—you're paying so much attention the label you completely forget to actually taste the wine.

[28:49] **MR:** Right. And to me, the worst thing that ever happened to the wine industry in my lifetime was the advent of Robert Parker and the *Wine Spectator*. Not because they're not good people, not because they don't have good palates, I'm not going to argue that, but because they have set a standard that is a homogenizing influence. And it is so corrosive. When Parker first came out, I was his favorite winery in Oregon. When he wrote his original article on Oregon, the new Wine Star it was my 2003 Winemakers Reserve that he wrote about.

So I'm not talking out of sour grapes—we parted ways after about five years in terms of his likings and my wines, but you would see young winemakers who were trying to do terroir, trying to make their own style. They would put their wine out on the market or they'd send it to Parker and they'd get a low score, particularly if they were employed by somebody else. They would go back and say, Oh, I guess I better change my winemaking so that Parker will give me good ratings so that we can get high wine prices. And the same thing with the *Wine Spectator*.

And so the fact that those two groups tended to have similar tastes in what they liked created a uniformity of style that was just terribly corrosive. I think that the Oregon industry would have been very, very different and there would have been a lot more difference in styles in our wines and in the United States as a whole, and even in the world, if that phenomena hadn't happened. And Steve Tanzer and the *Wine Enthusiast* are there too but they are minor players.

The way to learn about wine is to go to a good wine merchant, buy a bottle of—try and explain to him what you like, have him give you a bottle of wine, take it home and drink it, and if it isn't quite there, then you can go back to him and you can say, "Well, that was kind of okay but it was a little more rough compared to what I wanted," and so forth until he gives you another bottle.

Robert Parker doesn't give you a refund if you buy his recommendations and you don't like them. At least your local wine merchant will try and work with you and try and introduce you to new wines. So if you're with wine merchant A, and I'm with wine merchant B, and he's with wine merchant C, and they're with wine merchant E, we're all trying different wines and we're learning about wine. There is no monolithic uniformity to the industry, which has been just horrible. It's just been horrible. I think it's been starting to decline a little bit now, but you know—

I'll give you a very personal example here, talking about not taking my own advice. I get emails from a group called Wine Access. They were really good on white wines. I like Sancerre and Sauvignon Blanc and my wife does too. And we bought several different ones from them and they were all wonderful. So this last time they had a recommendation on a Côtes du Rhône and they talked about the score, it got a ninety-one, but they had to write out this young winemaker and everything. It just sounded really good on paper, so I bought a case of it without even tasting it. And they had another wine that I bought one bottle of that—I should have bought one bottle of each of them.

So Tom and I opened the one bottle and we were tasting it and he says, "Oh, that's pretty nice." I said, "How much do you think it's worth?" He said, "Oh, it's a good ten dollar wine. What'd you pay?" I said, "Twenty bucks." He says, "You're a damn fool." No, Tom doesn't say that, he's much more polite. He just looks at you. So then I said, "Let's try the case." Because it was much higher priced. When we opened one up—I'll try and see if aging improves it but it had all sorts of tannin, which a Côtes du Rhône shouldn't, in my opinion, have and it didn't have a lot of fruit to it.

It's another example: if you're going to buy wine on the Internet, buy a bottle, try it, and then reorder. Don't be seduced like I was by the free shipping and all that. So now I've got a case of wine, which, fortunately, I asked a friend if he wanted to buy in with me and I won't tell him how terrible it is. Make sure he gets his half first and then he can try it. Any other questions?

[35:17] **JDP:** I think that's good for now. I think we've got quite a bit, and we're going to—I think the students here have looked at some stuff—

[35:27] **BD¹:** We've got a couple of albums, can we take them with us so that we can scan things and then give them back to you?

[35:34] **MR:** Will you give me your first born if you don't return them?

[35:40] **BD:** We will be very careful with them.

[35:42] **MR:** Yes please. They are all we have.

[35:46] **JDP:** We've got a separate office and scanners so that—over in the library in Linfield so we'll take very good care of them.

¹ Barrett Dahl

[35:54] **MR:** Well, whatever you do with this interview, you need to turn that camera around and do a panorama of the view because when people ask me why I bought this place, they say, Was it the soil? Was it the aspect? And I say—Jerry Preston used to bring me out here, there used to be a big front porch across the front of this, and we would sit up here and drink. I drank David Lett’s first Oregon Spring wine—he wouldn’t even call it Pinot because it was from young vines. And we would sit up here and get pleasantly smashed and this view, I just fell in love with it. And this happened over three years. And if Jerry was down in the field on a tractor and I started running down, he would wave and say, “Go up to the house.” And I fell in love with the view from this. And in the fall we have a tradition—