

TIMELESS

Refinement

KING ESTATE
TOASTS 25 YEARS WITH
A 1995 PINOT GRIS

by Christine Heavens / photos by Leah Nash



King Estate's first vintage was 1992. Today, the family-owned and -operated winery produces world-class and age-worthy Pinot Gris.



It was a beautiful evening,

from my vantage-point. I could see the hills that formed the backbone of the eastern side of the valley, densely robed in evergreen trees and hunkered against a backdrop of stars that seemed to draw closer against the indigo-black palette of an ever-darkening sky. The evening air, as it so often is in the Willamette Valley, was crisp, but patio heaters made outdoor dining a welcome, cozy experience.

I'd had a full day of tasting and touring King Estate, now celebrating its 25th year, and dinner at the winery's acclaimed on-site restaurant proved to be the perfect close to the day's hectic pace. King Estate's proprietor and co-founder, Ed King, sent a parting gift to my table—a rare bottle of 1995 Estate Pinot Gris fished up from the depths of his private cellar. My server quietly informed me that there weren't many '95s left as he prised an intact but fragile cork from the bottle with an ah-so. I regarded my glass with some skepticism; the wine appeared to be oxidized. Even in our low-light setting, one could see that it was the color of diluted walnut wood at the rim; the brownish hue suggested the vagaries of time had long since taken their toll, that there wouldn't be much to savor.

Instead, the '95 sang, offering up a riot of caramelized apples, poached pears and less expected—though equally expressive—layers of marzipan, furniture lacquer and almond paste. On the



King Estate 1995 Pinot Gris stands the test of time



"I have done my part to soak up my share of aged white wines," says Ed King, "but I kept running into people who were surprised—still—to hear of these very old white wines from Oregon that have held up so well." King Estate houses a library of vintage Pinot Gris.



Kevin Sommelet is the winemaker at King Estate.



Brent Stone is Lab Director at King Estate.

palate, burnished, pleasantly bitter tertiary notes of apple seeds and walnut skins wrapped around a surprisingly fresh vein of acidity. I had never encountered a Pinot Gris like this. My server suggested raclette as an ideal match for this unexpected rarity. Yes, raclette, I thought, closing my eyes, savoring the imagined pairing.

The tasting I'd attended earlier in the afternoon showcased vintages spanning from 2004 to 2014, beautifully illustrating this point: Some domestic Pinot Gris can withstand aging, and indeed, will even improve with time. The notion that we can and should cellar these wines is contrary to how we've been taught to view this very old, mutated clone of Pinot Noir. Current vintages were fresh and showy with lush, tropical aromas of ripe mango and pineapple, or bruised pear and Golden Delicious apple. Almost all of them expressed minerality in one fashion or another; wet stones, talcum powder and even a touch chalkboard dust. As they mature, an array of secondary and tertiary notes emerges, along with a texture that's grown silkier and rounder with age—subtler, more complex aromas and flavors of smoke and spice, dried orange peel, almond skins and granulated honey.

A Steady Hand

Perhaps what is most intriguing about King Estate is the winery's dedication to maintaining stylistic continuity across decades, the winemaking team never giving in to trends or fickle experimentation. Vintages have a rhythm and cadence, and they are artfully woven together by faithfulness to style. Under Ed's pragmatic leadership and with early help from industry visionaries like Will Bucklin, Merry Edwards and the brilliant André Tchelistcheff, the wines' blueprint defined in early vintages has remained the standard.

Ed explained, "I have done my part to soak up my share of aged white wines, but I kept running into people who were surprised—still—to hear of these very old white wines from Oregon that have held up so well. Almost in frustration, I turned to our winemaking team, Spencer Spetnagel and our talented Lab Director, Brent Stone, and proposed that we do the technical work to understand how these lovely older Oregon

wines compare objectively with some of the globally famous white wine producers."

King Estate's trajectory has been one of ongoing refinement; like a marble sculptor sanding a statue, changes made over time polish wines whose features have long been determined. The fine-tuning can be seen in the range of the winery's initiatives supporting everything from their pending Biodynamic certification to better understanding the ageability of Pinot Gris.

For winemaker Kevin Sommelet—who was raised in Burgundy, a region with more AOCs than any other major wine growing area in France, and whose fence lines have been mapped and charted over centuries, not decades—King Estate's structured framework and somewhat codified tradition suit his Old World palate.

Sommelet followed in his father's footsteps, studying environmental engineering, and he worked successfully as an engineer in France, California and Oregon. In high school he began to drink and appreciate wine with his father. "It's such a beautiful activity," he mused; "I lost my dad to cancer in 2006." There was a long pause before he continued, "He planned to make wine when he retired. He gave me such a passion for it."

It was his father's passing that instilled in him a sense of urgency; Kevin quit his engineering job to enroll in Oregon State University's Viticulture and Enology program. While studying for his degree, he worked part-time at Van Duzer. He feels that growing up in Burgundy has allowed him to work with Oregon wines in an "elegant way." Following graduation, he moved on to Benton Lane in 2008 as an enologist. He later joined the team at King Estate in 2011.

While chatting with Kevin, we strolled through the estate's underground barrel room; neatly stacked barrels flank the main walkway crowned in dramatic quadripartite vaults. Kevin's eyes lit up as he led me to a section of French oak barrels containing some of his favorite Pinots from the 2014 vintage. "I love the acid and how it spreads across the palate," he says. Thief in one hand and a pair of stems in the other, it's very clear that he takes enormous pride in his work. "Right now the 2014s are very fresh; the glycerol will show up later as the wine matures."

Kevin's counterpart at King Estate is Spencer Spetnagel—he's recently been promoted from assistant winemaker to being in charge of the Estate's red wines. Like Kevin, his wine-making roots lie elsewhere. As with so many, the magnetic pull toward winemaking began in service. Spencer waited tables while studying for a degree in marketing in Georgia. "That's when I started going to tastings, and got more and more involved in wine lists. I never wanted to work in a cubicle," says Spencer.

"When I finally came to the conclusion that wine was it, I moved to Sonoma, started work at Ravenswood. I worked a couple of years in the cellar before finally taking the plunge to go into winemaking." Spencer's thirst to become a winemaker ultimately led him to enroll in the Viticulture and Oenology program at Lincoln University in New Zealand. After completing his degree, Spencer returned to Ravenswood as contract winemaker. In 2009, he took an assistant winemaker position at Bargetto, which bears the distinction of being the oldest winery in the Santa Cruz appellation. It was here that Spencer met his future wife. The couple relocated to Eugene in 2012, so that his wife could pursue her post-doctorate degree at the University of Oregon. "I've had to retrain my palate. Santa Cruz Mountain Pinot Noir is an entirely different beast compared to Oregon Pinot Noir, though certainly in the last few vintages ripeness has not been a problem," says Spencer.

Both Kevin and Spencer were keen to note that the estate still ferments in small lots, despite increasing in scale. Eight-ton fermenters are the standard, and each season the winery manages up to 300 separate lots. "We're not at all like a large-production winery from California; we have tons of small tanks. This helps us build complexity into our wines. The process of watching wines develop from harvest to the end of fermentation till it's bottle-ready two, three or five years down the road, that's incredibly rewarding," says Spencer.

For the team at King Estate, the winery that put Oregon Pinot Gris on the map, a bright future lies ahead. Guests at the winery's visitor center and tasting room are now able to taste and enjoy some of these alluring older vintages, and the estate's Tower Club members have recently been given the opportunity to buy them. **SJ**



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King Estate proprietor Ed King with his wife, Jodee.