

The Domaine Drouhin winery in the Dundee Hills.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

Oregon's Enduring Spirit of Collaboration

RECALLING THE BEGINNINGS—
AND BRILLIANT FUTURE—OF
WILLAMETTE VALLEY WINE

by Christine Havens

Robed in luxurious, perpetual green, the Willamette Valley is home to more than 270 wineries and over 1,000 vineyards. Oregon's largest growing region has enjoyed marked growth over the past few decades, thanks in part to a handful of families that arrived in the late 1960s with little more than determination, vision and a willingness to work together.

"My father always loved manual labor and farming; he had a deep connection to the land," Alison Sokol Blosser confides. She's now Co-President of Sokol Blosser, a position she shares with her brother, Alex. She recently took time out of her busy schedule to give us a glimpse into what it was like to grow up in Oregon's then-emerging wine industry.



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COURTESY OF SOKOL BLOSSER

A new generation: Alison Sokol Blosser is now Co-President of Sokol Blosser, a position she shares with her brother, Alex.



In the beginning: Bill Blosser plants Pinot Noir vines in the Old Vineyard Block, 1971.

"My parents were history majors; they met at Stanford," she relates. "Neither of them came from a farming or winemaking background, but they did have this crazy notion of wanting to work the land, doing something with wine and food culture."

Alison's parents arrived in Oregon in 1970 and settled on a five-acre parcel in the Dundee Hills that had been home to a senescent prune orchard. "It started as a hobby, and for the first few years, we sold the grapes. Later, with encouragement from my grandfather, we decided to build a family winery. The Letts [David and Diana Lett, founders of The Eyrie Vineyards] were just down the road, and the Ponzis [Dick and Nancy Ponzi of Ponzi Vineyards] weren't too far away. It started with a handful of people; everybody had day jobs, everybody came together to figure out how to trellis, how to deal with mildew. We shared equipment."

It was this generosity of spirit that laid the foundation for the Oregon wine industry. Collaboration is not unique to Oregon; one can find it in California and in Washington State, too. The difference perhaps is the degree to which these families worked and weathered vintages together, or as Domaine Drouhin's Managing Director, David Millman, so succinctly puts it, "What connects us is our common quest for excellence, and our desire to help each other get there."

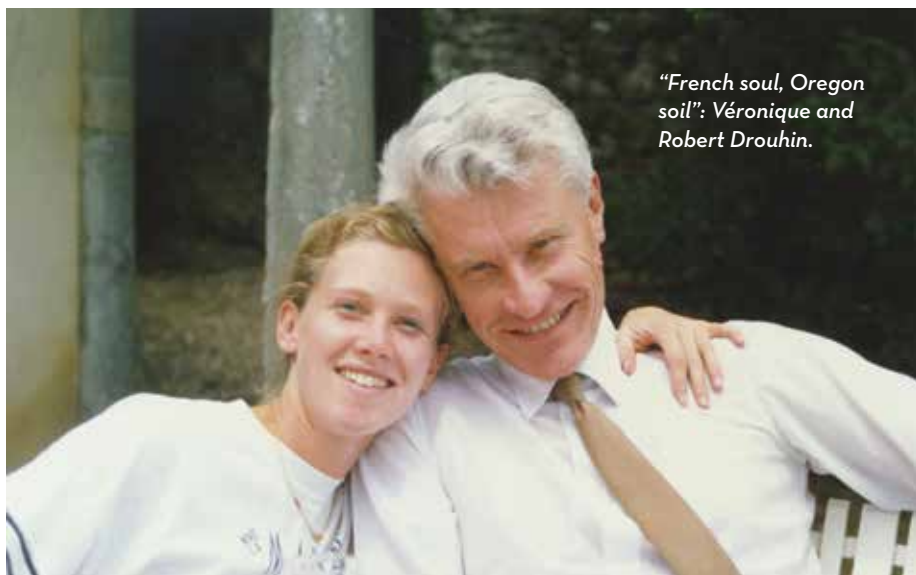
The Drouhins were the first Burgundians to invest in Oregon, and they did so because of the potential of the region and the warm reception they received from the small, closely-knit winemaking community. The fact that Oregon Pinot Noir enjoyed early success, earning a place on the world's stage in 1979, helped to cinch the decision. At the Gault-Millau French Wine Olympiad, The Eyrie Vineyards 1975 South Block placed among the top ten in the Pinot Noir category, outranking many of Burgundy's top reds—a meteoric rise considering that David Lett had established the AVA's first plantings of Pinot Noir in the brick red Jory-type volcanic soils of The Eyrie Vineyards just 14 years earlier.



A historic vine from Ponzi's original vineyard, planted in 1970.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON



"French soul, Oregon soil": Véronique and Robert Drouhin.

Upon receiving her Master's degree from the University of Dijon in 1986, Véronique Drouhin-Boss interned with Adelsheim Vineyards, Bethel Heights and Eyrie. "She couldn't have gone anywhere," says Millman; "instead, she chose Oregon. For her father, Robert Drouhin, it was very personal; they'd welcomed his daughter." The following year, in 1987, the Drouhins were invited

parcel without hesitation. What had once been a Christmas tree stand surrounded by halcyon wheat fields is where the Domaine Drouhin winery now stands. The IPNC, like Oregon Pinot Camp, has been a magnet for sommeliers seeking to experience Oregon from the ground up.

"When the Drouhins came," Alison recounts, "they built the first gravity flow winery; they brought with them an over-the-row tractor; they planted meter by meter. For us, it was a revelation. We all learned from each another, and we eventually reconfigured our winery for gravity flow as well. Having the Drouhins as neighbors felt like an affirmation that we were moving in the right direction."

Less than a decade later Luisa Ponzi, now winemaker at Ponzi Vineyards, received the certificate Brevet Professionnel d'Oenologie et Viticulture in Beaune. She was the first female American winemaker to earn such a prestigious distinction, and she credits her parents with instilling in her a strong work ethic: "At the time, being a farmer was not unheard of, but coming from a winemaking family was strange and embarrassing. We ate weird food. My parents loved Burgundy wines; they were very cosmopolitan, very European." She leans forward and smiles. "It was a lot of work. My father worked

to participate in the first International Pinot Noir Celebration, and on that trip, Robert decided to purchase land in the Dundee Hills. He snapped up a 100-acre

TASTING NOTES by Christine Havens (except where noted)

Sokol Blosser 2014 Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley (SRP \$19) Sokol Blosser's organically farmed Willamette Valley Pinot Gris sees extended time on the lees, which serves to amplify body and texture in this lively cool-climate white. The nose is a bit reticent: meadow flowers, the echo of Asian pear, yellow apples, and talc. In the mouth, however, it's a different story, more serious than expected: high-toned acidity, grapefruit pith, Granny Smith apples and leesy wet dough lead the charge to a very persistent finish that hovers at the back palate.

Sokol Blosser 2014 Evolution Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley (SRP \$20) The 2014 Evolution Pinot Noir offers up classic notes of seedy raspberries, anise, decomposing leaves and forest floor. It's

clean and bright, with nimble, high-toned red fruit—cranberries and pie cherries underpinned by ultrafine tannins and subtle, dusty, earthy notes. Great QPR.

Sokol Blosser 2013 Pinot Noir, Dundee Hills Estate (SRP \$38) Sokol Blosser's Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Estate 2013 is fine-boned and earthy. Brambly forest berries and black cherries are firmly grounded in damp tilth, tomato leaf and forest floor aromas. The attack is both nimble and tart, with mounting energy that surfaces through layers of black and red fruit, subtle minerality accompanied by a wild, almost feral edge



PHOTO: CIVIK PHOTOGRAPHY/SOKOL BLOSSER

and a pleasant savoriness that just goes on and on.

Domaine Drouhin Oregon 2014 Chardonnay Arthur, Dundee Hills (SRP \$35) Beautifully delineated, Domaine Drouhin's Chardonnay Arthur is pure and fresh, despite 2014 being a ripe year: Layers of crisp d'Anjou pear and apple, white flowers, white peach, granulated honey. It's equally delicate and finely wrought on the palate, with French oak lending playing a supporting role to an ethereal vein of minerality shines through this wine's limpid, sparkling and pale yellow countenance. There is a wisp of a suggestion of sweetness, like lemon cake, right at the core.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMAINE DROUHIN OREGON

full-time as a teacher and later my mother came on board to market the wines. They were trying to sell an unknown region and what was at the time a virtually unknown variety. It was a huge, huge challenge, and it was non-stop."

Her sister, Anna Maria Ponzi, the winery's President and Director of Sales and Marketing, added, "Our first harvest was in 1974, and from the beginning, it was as if we were all in the foxhole together. I watched my mother's early attempts to sell our wines in Portland—initially, she wasn't successful. There was no reason to care about us. Back then, we had a long-term vision, and nobody was listening. Had we not banded together, we never would have reached critical mass. We were starting from ground zero. There was a lot of forward thinking early on, and they had high standards, despite having little experience." The Ponzis and the Sokol Blossers were actively involved in tightening up labeling standards; they remain the strictest in the U.S. And they were passionate about funding research, which continues today with oversight from The Oregon Wine Board.

"What I love and am so impressed with is how this second generation of winemakers has continued to embrace that same collaborative spirit," says Alison. "It's how



Strong work ethic: Sisters Maria and Luisa Ponzi.

we do things. No one questions it. This is who we are, and this is what we do. There is still so much work to be done, and there will always be a need for us to tell the Oregon story."

The Sokol Blossers are somewhat unique in that they focused not only on Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris but also on cool-climate German varieties Müller-Thurgau and Riesling. They were notably the first in the United States to grow Müller-Thurgau, which Alison enthusiastically refers to as a fabulous variety. It never really took off, but

it is the base for the winery's crispy and ever-popular Evolution Lucky No. 9 white wine blend.

"Alex stepped into the role of Head Winemaker in 2012. I'm excited about the future. His wines have so much soul, they have his charm and his wit—they're simply beautiful. We have this amazing product that we get to share. Out on the national market, I want to continue to beat the drum." *§*

Look for our Willamette Valley Somm Camp report in the next issue.

Domaine Drouhin Oregon 2014 Chardonnay Roserock, Eola-Amity Hills (SRP \$35) Roserock should be an exciting wine for Domaine Drouhin fans. 2014 is the inaugural release of this single-vineyard beauty, aptly named after Roserock Vineyard, a cooler site in the Eola-Amity Hills that was established beginning in 2004. Just like the wines released under the Drouhin label, Roserock possesses a sort of timeless elegance. Silky yet precise, concentrated but still light on its feet, this feminine Oregon Chardonnay unfurls revealing layers of pears, lemon curd, orange blossom, honey, almond paste, anise and a fleeting kiss of oak.

Domaine Drouhin Oregon 2014 Pinot Noir Roserock, Eola-Amity Hills (SRP \$35) Aptly named, Drouhin's Rose Rock Pinot Noir hails from a parcel seated at the southern tip of the Eola-Amity Hills

AVA. The grapes harvested from this site are grown in ancient volcanic soils and benefit from the cooling Van Duzer winds. Blithe floral notes; a bouquet of wild roses, lavender, lilac, dust, anise, spice, and crushed stones lead into a wine with arching acidity that spreads languidly across the palate amidst black fruit notes, fine tannins, high-toned cranberry notes and toast.

Ponzi Vineyards 2015 Estate Pinot Blanc, Willamette Valley (\$22) In what was a near-perfect vintage for Oregon, Ponzi's 2015 Pinot Blanc is produced entirely from the LIVE Certified Sustainable Aurora Vineyard in the Chehalem Mountains AVA. Bright, smooth and juicy with lively citrus and clean, lifted style. —Anthony Dias Blue

Ponzi Vineyards 2015 Estate Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley (\$19) With initial plant-



PHOTO COURTESY OF PONZI VINEYARDS

ings in 1978, Ponzi has been recognized as one of Oregon's most consistent Pinot Gris producers for more than three decades and remains a leader for this varietal. Juicy and a bit spritzzy with smooth, clean and tangy apple flavors; lifted and fresh, bright and long. —A. D. B.

Ponzi Vineyards 2014 Tavola Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley (\$SRP 27) 2014 was the warmest season on record in the Willamette Valley due to higher than normal minimum temperatures, resulting in a generous, ripe vintage. This wine is made for early release and everyday drinking. Suave and forward with tangy cherry and spice; fresh, bright and generous. —A. D. B.