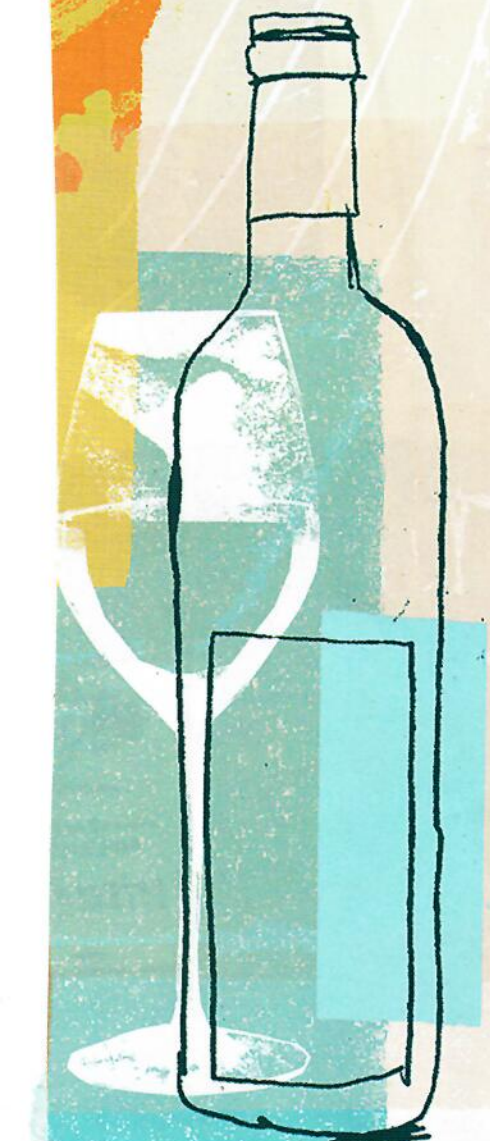




# EMERGING STRENGTHS

With success comes innovation. Oregon's growers and winemakers continue to explore new varieties and styles.


BY PAUL GREGUTT | ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAVEL RAFFERTY



Oregon Pinot Noir has enjoyed much success, but the state is not a one-trick pony. Oregon's diversity of climate and soil has encouraged winemakers to expand their viticultural horizons.

Even the Pinot-centric Willamette Valley offers impressive plantings of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Riesling.

On the Oregon side of the Walla Walla Valley, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater AVA produces some of the country's best Syrahs. From the Columbia Gorge AVA—also shared with Washington but divided here by the Columbia River—come racy whites, meaty Tempranillos and potent, old-vine Zinfandels.



In the Umpqua, Rogue and Applegate Valleys of Southern Oregon, a mix of elevations and a moderately hotter climate ripens outstanding Albariño, Grüner Veltliner, Viognier, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and both white and red Rhône-style blends. Many other grapes and different blends are being investigated throughout the state, all in limited quantities, but with some success.

Most notably, Oregon is producing terroir-driven Riesling, Tempranillo and *méthode Champenoise* sparkling wines that have shown consistency across multiple vintages. These emerging trends have attracted dozens of winemakers, and that alone is a good indicator of quality.



## RIESLING: FLEXIBLE APPROACHES

In the 1960s and early '70s, the entire Pacific Northwest was regarded as too cold to ripen red grapes. As a result, Riesling was often the first grape that growers attempted. It withstood the cold and occasional frost, and made serviceable sweet wines that could be sold within months of harvest.

Fast forward several decades, and an important handful of Oregon producers are making Riesling a priority. Its stylistic flexibility is especially appealing. For consumers who prefer sweeter styles, it's an excellent entry-level wine. The variety can also be delicious when finished bone dry; it can be made into a *sekt*-style sparkling wine; and, of course, it can deliver ultrasweet late-harvest and ice wines.

Riesling offers other advantages. Top-tier examples cost far less than high-scoring Chardonnays, while inexpensive versions rarely turn generic like other cheap whites. When drunk young, it's fresh and delicious, though a well-made Riesling, with the dynamic tension that comes from the perfect sugar/acid balance, can age for decades. Plus, alcohol levels are comfortably low, and the wine is usually bottled under screwcap, eliminating risk of contamination from bad cork.

Statewide plantings (782 acres as of 2016) place the grape a distant third (behind Pinot Gris and Chardonnay, respectively) among Oregon whites, and fourth overall, accounting for about 3% of the total acreage. Dedicated producers, however, have found unique expressions for the variety in Oregon. Grown on the cooler, western side of the Cascade Range, the state's Rieslings are refined and aromatic, with naturally high acidity that lends them good structure.

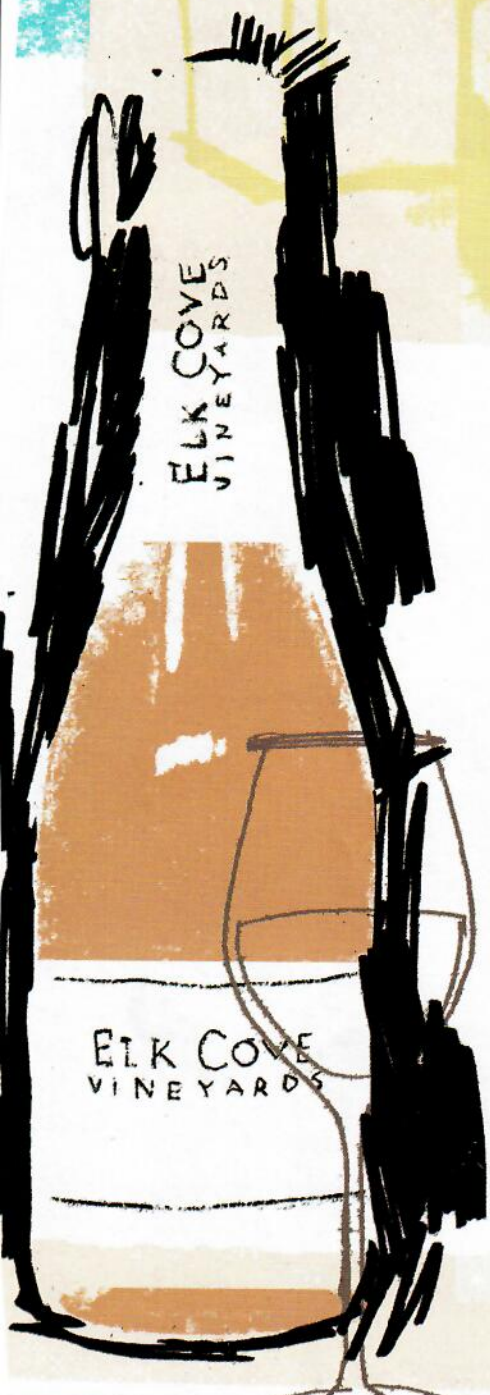
Harry Peterson-Nedry, founder of Chehalem Winery (now under new ownership), has lobbied seriously for a Riesling renaissance. Especially as he witnessed how 30- and 40-year-old vines were being pulled out to plant Chardonnay—"a travesty," he says.

James Frey, winemaker/owner of Trisaetum, admits his focus on Riesling instead of Pinot Noir had some head-scratching responses. But his love for the grape's natural acidity and ageability makes it, for him, "a rather magical wine."

Other wineries producing Riesling include Holloran Vineyard Wines, Love & Squalor, Ovum Wines and Weinbau Paetra. But at the head of the pack is Brooks Winery, which produces up to 20 different Riesling releases annually.







## SPARKLING WINES: NEW VENTURES

For decades, Oregon's sparkling-wine industry could be summed up in two words: Argyle Winery. Still by far the largest producer of méthode Champenoise wines in the state, the winery devotes about one-third of its 80,000-case annual production to bubbles.

Argyle releases up to 10 cuvées each year, including a newly expanded Extended Tirage program, which is laid down up to a decade prior to release. In recent years, others have followed suit, building on the state's affinity for cool-climate Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to make seriously good sparklers.

In the late '90s, Tony Soter began making exceptional Soter Brut and Brut Rosés. Rollin Soles, Argyle's founding winemaker, established his own Roco brand in 2001. His lineup includes a spectacular *tête de cuvée* RMS Brut. More than a dozen

high-end Oregon sparkling wines have also begun to appear in the past year, including Pashey Cuvée Extra Brut and Blanc de Blanc Extra Brut, Elk Cove Brut Rosé, Lundeen Brut Blanc de Noirs, Stoller LaRue's Brut Rosé, Lange Mia Mousseux Brut Rosé and more.

The source of this fizz explosion is a nondescript, unmarked warehouse on the outskirts of McMinnville, home of the Radiant Sparkling Wine Company. Proprietor Andrew Davis is another Argyle alum, and left there to offer wineries access to the expertise and specialized equipment required for true méthode Champenoise wines. More than three dozen wineries have signed on for his "cradle to grave service."

Can Oregon replace California as the U.S. leader in traditional method sparkling wines? Maybe not in quantity, but as for quality, well, see for yourself.