



CUTTING EDGE OREGON

These forward-thinking winemakers aim to redefine the state's scene.

BY PAUL GREGUTT

PHOTOS BY EZRA MARCOS

The current generation of Oregon winemakers is moving the state's viticulture in splendid new directions. While Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris still account for almost 75% of Oregon's production, impressive growth is afoot for the state's other top grapes—Chardonnay, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Interest is also on the rise for other varieties, such as Riesling and Tempranillo.

But this progress stretches beyond mere grape choice. The state's pioneers had an "anything goes" philosophy, and today's game-changing winemakers continue to embrace such thinking. They're shattering any notion that Oregon is a one-trick wine pony, experimenting with diverse clones, sustainable farming and natural fermentation practices.

Leah Jørgensen is exploring the many possibilities of Cabernet Franc. Herb Quady showcases southern Oregon Viognier and Syrah. Isabelle Meunier shines a spotlight on Willamette Valley subregions. John House and Ksenija Kostic House tackle cool-climate whites, while consulting winemaker Drew Voit has a hand in a dozen start-ups.

Each innovator has forged an exciting future of vinous variety for Oregon—and the best is yet to come.

Isabelle Meunier

"On the world stage, most regions are focused on vineyards," says Meunier. "Here [in the Willamette Valley], a handful of sites are recognized, but not as many as you'd expect. We're on the springboard, and I wanted to be part of that conversation."

Meunier, a native of Quebec, studied winemaking and viticulture in New Zealand and Burgundy, where she worked at Felton Road and Domaine de la Vougeraie, respectively. In 2007, Dominique Lafon hired her to oversee winemaking at the new Evening Land property.

She took over winemaking of the company's Sonoma Coast wines in 2012, and met her business partner, Greg Ralston, that same year, when he was appointed Evening Land's new CEO.

The two left Evening Land and founded Lavinea in 2014, with Meunier as winemaker and Ralston as managing partner. Their experience and shared passion brought quick success.

"We came to realize that we had a shared sensibility about what Oregon Pinot and Chardonnay could be," says Ralston. "Isabelle had made two vintages of Sonoma Coast wines also, which showed me her skill set. At the end of the day, there has to be a compelling story behind the wines, and Isabelle has the ability to tease a pure voice out of a site."

"We want Lavinea to present a portfolio of wines that can showcase the beauty of each site," says Meunier, "sites that are able to shine in the glass as a great place. In order for that to happen, you need vine age, soil, exposure and each site has to have a certain point of distinctiveness that makes it different from the norm."

Each of Meunier's wines achieves that. Together, they pinpoint specific characteristics of Yamhill-Carlton, Eola-Amity Hills, Dundee Hills and Tualatin Valley sites.

In the winery, Meunier follows an all-natural approach that includes native yeast fermentations and minimal oak profiles. She fashions wines with deeply etched flavors that "integrate the best of both the Old World philosophies with New World techniques," she says.

Her approach is hard to dispute. Meunier focused on Chardonnay, considered by many Oregon's next superstar variety, early on, and uses LIVE certified-organic grape sources. She's also embraced innovative ways to work with existing trellising and unique picking techniques that have paid dividends. This craftsmanship is emblematic of the constant attention to detail that results in great wines.



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