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The Rise of **Chardonnay** in Central Willamette Valley

by Elaine Chukan Brown



“We started with pinot noir,” says Erica Landon of Walter Scott Wines. “Historically, you couldn’t get any money for chardonnay. In Willamette Valley, it was treated like a slightly higher-end pinot gris.” In 2008, when Landon founded Walter Scott with her husband, Ken Pahlow, “there wasn’t a whole lot of great chardonnay fruit out there,” she recalls, “and few wines from it to be taken seriously.” Then Evening Land released their inaugural vintage of La Source Chardonnay from the Seven Springs Vineyard in Eola-Amity Hills. With a mouthwatering wash of brioche and bay laurel, lime leaf and pear, the 2007 was energetic, crystalline and high-toned. The landscape for chardonnay began to change.



Photo by Easton Richmond Photography



Erica Landon and Ken Pahlow

“There is great acid retention here from the wind and the diurnal shift. It’s a perfect storm to create wines that have more tension and precision.”
—Erica Landon, Walter Scott Wines

Bergström had already been producing highly regarded chardonnay with finesse and energizing minerality from the northern Willamette. In fact, the variety was among the region’s first plantings in the mid-1960s, and producers like Eyrie, Bethel Heights, Cameron and, in the 1980s, Arterberry, made site-expressive wines driven by fresh acidity. But none had received the kind of national attention and critical acclaim of Evening Land’s La Source. Chardonnay in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s was dominated by the California trend of rich, creamy flavors cloaked under new oak. Many producers in Oregon paralleled that style but the fruit didn’t support that approach. The region had yet to articulate a clear Willamette signature for chardonnay.

With its proximity to Portland, the northern Willamette Valley had ushered in the first of the region’s vines. It was also the focus of the growth and turnover that came in the 1990s, when many growers pulled out their old chardonnay vines or grafted them to Dijon clones as a rush of newer sites were established. But the newer clones did little to change the market’s impression of Willamette Valley chardonnay, and plantings began to decline. In 1998, the Willamette Valley had more than 9,000 planted acres, including 1,600 planted to chardonnay. By 2008, chardonnay’s total acreage had been reduced by half, while overall vineyards in the region had grown to more than 14,000 acres. A few older chardonnay blocks remained, most tended by ardent farmers who were loathe to pull older vines, others in outlying rural districts that were slow to change.

Meanwhile, in what was once considered the remote south, Mark Vlossak founded St. Innocent Winery in 1988 with a focus on white wines. He had apprenticed at Arterberry, where Fred Arterberry, Jr., developed the first sparkling wines in Willamette Valley, so Vlossak was used to looking for fruit with high

natural acidity. With his early commitment to white wines, Vlossak managed to convince Al MacDonald, a grower in the cool, windy Eola-Amity Hills, to replant his chardonnay at Seven Springs Vineyard with new plant material from Dijon. Funding the effort himself, Vlossak got his wish, along with a gentleman’s agreement that he would get the fruit.

Seven Springs was a hillside MacDonald and his then-wife, Joni Weatherspoon, first planted in 1982, establishing 32 acres in equal portions of chardonnay and pinot noir. At the time there were a mere 1,812 total planted acres in the entire valley.

Seven Springs quickly became a coveted fruit source, especially for pinot noir, supplying wineries such as neighboring Cristom and Bethel Heights, as well as Domaine Drouhin, Adelsheim and Patricia Green. Within a decade, Seven Springs had expanded to more than 82 acres; the newer plantings were all pinot, but for a small block of gamay noir.

Meanwhile, at St. Innocent, Vlossak was expanding production, and, in the process, the balance shifted predominantly to pinot noir. Still, he persisted with chardonnay, even as Oregon chardonnay continued to languish and the variety’s acreage began to decline. Working with fruit from Seven Springs’ two chardonnay blocks, La Source and Summum, he produced wines that captured the concentration and mineral drive that would come to define the vineyard, richly flavored wines resplendent with fresh acidity.

When, in 2007, Evening Land secured a lease on the entire Seven Springs Vineyard, Vlossak lost his Seven Springs chardonnay. The La Source and Summum blocks became part of the Evening Land program. The new team shifted to organic farming. They also began picking earlier, and focused on showcasing the site’s innate concentration and mineral drive without imposing richness in the cellar. Winemakers Dominique Lafon and Isabelle Meunier almost immediately grabbed national attention for their efforts. The combination of outside perspective from Lafon and Meunier, and the marketing acumen of Evening Land founder Mark Tarlov, brought a newfound interest in the variety.

In 2011, Pahlow and Landon made wine from two small parcels of chardonnay. Quiet enthusiasm was just beginning to circle the variety in the region. “That year we got two completely different blocks of chardonnay,” says Landon, one from mature vines in the Chehalem Mountains, the other from the Bieze Vine-

Photo by Easton Richmond Photography



Dominique Lafon of Lingua Franca

yard, a newly established site on the ridgeline directly above Seven Springs. Pahlow had worked with the variety alongside Vlossak at St. Innocent and had seen what Lafon and Meunier did with it during his tenure at Evening Land.

"We really loved it," says Landon. "Then we started looking for chardonnay. We said, we are going to offer farmers more money for quality farming to get really good fruit. That hadn't been happening here for chardonnay. By 2013, we knew we were really into it, so we started seeking out the best sites."

The search kept bringing them back to the central Willamette Valley. "That's when we found out about Craig Williams and X-Novo," says Landon.

It was 2009 when Williams planted X-Novo vineyard. At that time there was essentially no new growth in chardonnay in the Willamette Valley. Williams planted two acres of chardonnay and one of pinot noir. "If I had this to do over again I would plant every vine to chardonnay," he says today. "I think there is a huge upside to chardonnay in Oregon. And that's not to take away anything from pinot noir." Today, the X-Novo chardonnay goes entirely to Walter Scott Wines.

Williams is a surprising proponent for Willamette Valley chardonnay. His career began in Napa Valley cabernet working at Joseph Phelps. But at the end of the 1990s, the winery asked him to help develop a cooler-climate vineyard in Freestone, north of the Petaluma Gap on the Sonoma Coast. "We also planted pinot noir, but the reason we went over to Freestone was to establish a separate domain for the chardonnay we were making." Researching the unique viticultural needs of the varieties, he realized he wanted to plant a vineyard of his own. "I decided if I was going to focus on chardonnay, I wanted to do it in Willamette Valley. Everyone in California thought I was crazy."

Williams decided to take advantage of the clonal diversity in the region. "All I did was think about how to amplify the place. I decided to put in as many good selections as I could." In the two acres of chardon-

nay at X-Novo, he planted 15—a mix of California heritage cuttings and the newer Dijon clones. "Really what I'm trying to do is add diversity. Some people might say one of the clones I planted isn't the best selection in the world but that's okay. I think that I have a healthier vineyard with the diversity, and with that mixture you get a more interesting wine. I believe having this *sélection massale* approach, regardless of what you use, leads to layering in the wine."

The idea came to him in tasting wines through Burgundy. Many of the top vineyards are planted to old vines that are well adapted to their site, but have also had a bevy of single-vine replants. The combination creates an innate diversity in the vineyard. Tasting the resulting chardonnay from X-Novo, it's a wine that offers layered, aromatic intensity, followed by mineral density on the palate and mouthwatering acidity.

After seeing how well X-Novo delivered, Williams established Kindred, a slightly larger vineyard on the next hill. Planted in 2012, Kindred has seven acres of chardonnay, and Williams is expanding it to a total of 15. It also includes four and a half acres of pinot. The first fruit from the site came online in 2015. Williams

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—Craig Williams, X-Novo





Mimi Casteel farms LSV and Bunker Hill for Larry Stone, as well as her own vineyard, Hope Well.

cel adjacent to Seven Springs, establishing just over seven acres of chardonnay and 58 of pinot noir. In the four years since, his attention has turned more strongly to chardonnay. He intends to expand his plantings until he has equal proportions of the two varieties. Alongside his home vineyard of LSV, Stone has also begun to expand his chardonnay production with access to Bunker Hill.

While Stone and his team have been searching out cool sites for chardonnay, waiting for LSV to come online, Pahlow and Landon had spoken to Michael Lundeen of Walnut City Wineworks. He'd been making chardonnay from

says, "I have sixteen or seventeen different clonal selections at Kindred. It's planted to a true sélection massale style. If you take a block you get the whole mixture." Flaneur and Big Table Farm buy chardonnay from Kindred, as does Lingua Franca, a recent project led by Master Sommelier Larry Stone.

Since Williams has started planting, the area has expanded into a focal point for chardonnay vineyards. Nearby, Bethel Heights hosts the oldest chardonnay of the area, established in the late 1970s. They've also expanded their chardonnay holdings into the adjacent Justice vineyard. Bethel Heights makes single-vineyard chardonnays from each site. A bit north, viticulturist Mimi Casteel farms her own vineyard, Hope Well. This year she will harvest the first fruit from her chardonnay vines. Next door sits Elton Vineyard, where Isabelle Meunier now makes chardonnay for her newer project, Lavinea. A bit south, Domaine Drouhin also makes chardonnay from its newer Roserock vineyard, right next door to Williams's Kindred. More recently, a rush of new small-scale vineyards have begun to appear throughout these hillsides as well. Even Seven Springs has begun to change. Last year, Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman, who now own Evening Land and its long-term lease on the vineyard, replanted portions of what were previously some of Seven Springs's top blocks of pinot to chardonnay, something previously unheard of in the region. Seven Springs has inspired Stone as well.

"So many people have bought fruit from Seven Springs and made good wine," says Stone.

He believes so thoroughly in the area he began planting his own vineyard—LSV—in 2013, on a par-

Bunker Hill, the site planted and, at the time, still farmed by John Gilpin. Lundeen didn't need all five acres so he asked if Walter Scott would be interested. When Pahlow saw the site, he was hooked. He also called Stone, a fellow Evening Land alumnus.

Bunker Hill was planted in the 1990s. Don Still, a landowner in the South Salem Hills—part of the central Willamette Valley, just south of the Eola-Amity Hills—decided he wanted a home vineyard as a hobby and asked viticulturist John Gilpin to plant it for him. When Gilpin placed the order for grafted vines, it turned out only chardonnay was available. Still wanted his vineyard, so the site became five acres of chardonnay, today known as Bunker Hill. By coincidence, at the time, MacDonald and Vlossak were also planning their replant of Seven Springs chardonnay and sourced the same vine material.

Over the next 20 years, Bunker Hill went through a steady rotation of wineries, always able to sell the fruit but without any fanfare. As a hobby vineyard it lacked a dedicated winemaker to promote it. That's changed since Walter Scott and Lingua Franca started producing wine from the site. The teams at both wineries were struck by the quality of the site, and both have made it a key part of their chardonnay programs.

After his first vintage with Bunker Hill, Stone couldn't believe the quality of the wine. He quickly jumped to establish a long-term lease, preserve its older vines and shift to organic farming. He now keeps most of the fruit for Lingua Franca and continues to sell to Walter Scott. "The soil structure is similar to LSV and Seven Springs," Stone says, as are the climate conditions.



“It isn’t technically in the same sub-AVA,” says Landon, but “the South Salem Hills are essentially an extension of the Eola-Amity Hills in terms of structure and climate. The central Willamette Valley has a lot of shallow soil, and cooler microclimate sites.” The cooler temperatures are thanks, partially, to the Van Duzer Corridor.

The Van Duzer Corridor, a low spot in the coastal range that pulls in cooling winds from the Pacific Ocean, impacts the climate of the entire Willamette Valley but it most directly impacts the central Willamette Valley, where evening temperatures are consistently ten degrees colder at night than in the northern Willamette Valley. And since the wind is more direct, daily afternoon gusts average 10 to 15 miles per hour through much of the central Willamette. Studies have shown that, when winds reach eight miles per hour, stomata on vine leaves close, slowing the vines’ respiration of acidity. Slower respiration means better acid retention in the fruit.

“We really want to preserve the natural acidity in the wine,” says Thomas Savre, who works alongside Dominique Lafon as winemaker of Lingua Franca. The heightened wind exposure and cooler temperatures of the area elongate the growing season, leading to wines that ripen at lower alcohol with higher acidity. The growing conditions change choices in the cellar. As Savre explains, simply adding acid to rebalance a wine in the cellar isn’t going to give quite the same outcome as fruit coming in with good natural acidity. “Acid adds are not going to be metabolized



Thomas Savre

by the yeast [during fermentation], so it is more likely to be tasted and not as well integrated structurally in the final wine. It is very important to me that we make Oregon wine.” For Savre, choosing sites that naturally retain higher acidity in the grapes helps him accomplish that goal.

“Bunker Hill is like a gift from somewhere,” says Savre. And it is a sort of miracle. The site planted, and even maintained for more than 20 years, as a mere hobby, without even a specific interest in the variety

planted, turns out to be one of the region’s iconic vineyards, only just recognized. “The wine is really delicious.”

Stone describes the wine from Bunker Hill as having “layers of mineral complexity, full of very intense flavor on the palate but like air. It has lots of presence but is ethereal, elevated. It has fruit but it floats.” Landon, too, describes the site as making wines that are utterly distinctive.

The area’s wind and cooling temperatures also result in thicker grape skins, which can give a pleasing phenolic frame, even to chardonnay. “That little bit of phenolic presence drives tension in the wine,” says Landon.

For producers like Walter Scott and Lingua Franca, the central Willamette Valley is a region that speaks of a distinctly Oregon chardonnay, a signature driven by freshness and energy. “There is great acid retention here from the wind and the diurnal shift,” Landon says. “It’s a perfect storm to create wines that have more tension and precision.” ■

Larry Stone, MS, has planted chardonnay at LSV in the Eola-Amity Hills (above); Thomas Savre serves as winemaker for Lingua Franca, making chardonnay from both Bunker Hill and LSV.



Larry Stone, MS