

Director of New Media and
oenophile **Howard Hewitt**



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WINE FORMER

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VIDON
VINEYARD



—photos by Drew Casey '12

Pursuing his avocation, the College's director of new media has learned much about wine, and this about wine-country travel...

 WINE GEEKS NEED TO GET THEIR NOSES out of the glass.

When their eyes shift above the rim of the Riedel, they might notice the great people behind the counters doing the grunt work and managing the wineries.

Last summer I traveled to Oregon's Willamette Valley. I went to enjoy the wine and beautiful vistas, setting aside time to casually interview a few folks and gather some material for my newspaper columns and for an article for *Palate Press*, the national online wine magazine. I was accompanied by Portland native Drew Casey '12, an accomplished photographer and budding Pinotophile.

As we began the trip, I wrestled with story ideas. After just one day, I knew the individual people stories were better than what I found at the bottom of a fat-bottomed glass of Pinot Noir.

Many consumers couldn't care less about the finicky details of wine. Lengthy descriptions like "hints of dark fruit, well-balanced tannins, and significant aging ability" often bear little context that is meaningful to the average reader. And while the mountains, rolling hills, and river that define this part of wine country are beautiful, what about the people who live here? What are their stories and aspirations? > P38

ABOVE THE RIM

—by Howard Hewitt





► ON OUR FIRST DAY IN MCMINNVILLE we met Mari Yeckel, one of many young women working behind the counter in one of many tasting rooms. She was charming and funny. She told us about her food blog, “The Unexpected Harvest,” and recommended a great place for lunch. She also told us we had to go see Don Hagge at Vidon Vineyard. We kept hearing that suggestion all day.

That afternoon we found Vidon near closing time, up a gravel road with another great valley view. Don Hagge’s wines were fabulous, but Don wasn’t there. We returned two days later and met the 80-year-old North Dakota native.

Don had worked in the Apollo space program and lived in France doing postgraduate work. He also holds a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley and an EMBA from Stanford. He calls himself a farmer

and winemaker. The vineyard’s Facebook page features a photo of him riding his tractor around the property. He served as president and CEO of three different energy and technology companies before making wine.

Don had the hands of a farmer, calloused and tanned. And after hearing his background and his insistence we return to say hello, it wasn’t surprising his wine was some of the best we tasted during our trip. Perhaps it was his wine; perhaps it was his story.

But one of the most delicious tastes of the trip was hardly a wine at all. Lynnette Shaw and Amy Wilder have created a sensation in Carlton known as the Republic of Jam. They take Oregon’s incredible fruits and combine them with the area’s wines and spices and create unbelievable taste combinations that lean to the savory side. Many of the jams can be used for entrees or in ways you’ve never imagined using a jar of breakfast spread.

(from left) Meeting people is half the joy of visiting wine country. Mari Yeckel was a blast at Willamette Vineyards tasting room; the Republic of Jam and owners Lynette and Amy (*pictured with “Jamprentice” Charles*) were a highlight of the trip; poet, musician, and wine pioneer Don Lange pours **Drew Casey ‘12** a taste of the “Three Hills Cuvee” Pinot Noir; Forrest Schaad at Sokol Blosser Vineyards, Oregon’s first tasting room; Domaine Drouhin Managing Director David Millman; Don Hagge of Vidon Vineyard; Emily Gladhart, who owns Winter’s Hill Vineyard with her husband, Peter.

(left) Blueberries cooking in the Republic of Jam kitchen.





Don Lange is either “the finest songwriter to make great New World Pinot Noir, or the best winemaker to ever write great songs.”

Lynnette’s secret, she says with a laugh: “I don’t like sweet stuff.”

These fabulously fun and creative women were terrific hosts. While their jams were amazing, it was the enthusiasm they shared about their entrepreneurship I’ll remember.

WINE WRITERS DO HAVE ACCESS others don’t enjoy. Several of our stops included conversations with winery owners and winemakers. Our most pleasurable and memorable visit was with Don Lange at Lange Vineyards. Don is one of the valley’s wine pioneers and most recognizable names. A soft-spoken, funny, gracious man, Don was a singer-songwriter long before people used that term, back when Garrison Keillor was still a disc jockey in Minneapolis playing Don’s songs on his drive-time radio show. He established the winery in the late 1980s and today is either, as his Web site states, “the finest songwriter to make great New World Pinot Noir, or the best winemaker to ever write great songs.”

It’s an amazing experience to meet the people who shaped a region. But there are always younger and newer names who leave a lasting impression. We met 25-year-old Forrest Schaad at Sokol Blosser Vineyards—Oregon’s first tasting room. This blonde-headed ball of enthusiasm poured our wines and described them with expertise beyond his years.

His story is better than just another server behind another tasting room bar. I struck up a conversation and learned that Forrest tends vineyards with his father. He even has a few acres of his own. When I asked him his career plans, he didn’t hesitate: “I want to be the winemaker at Sokol Blosser.”

ON OUR FINAL STOP of the trip we met David Millman, managing director of Domaine Drouhin Oregon. Drouhin is an iconic name in wine, and David showed us around the grounds of the famous Burgundy family’s U.S. operation. He had relocated from Los Angeles after working in the music industry. He introduced us to 16-year-old Arthur Drouhin, son of winemaker Veronique.

David shared a great story of how Burgundy wines are often named for family daughters, but never sons. Apparently young Arthur felt slighted after his sisters were given such honors. Mother Veronique, winemaker for DDO and France’s Joseph Drouhin, asked family patriarch Robert for permission to name a wine after

Arthur. But Burgundy families are all about the tradition, and the elder Drouhin said no.

Veronique didn’t give up easily, and eventually Robert gave his blessing to put his grandson’s name on a white, instead of the traditional red wine. The Arthur Chardonnay is widely distributed.

Arthur was a bit shy. He was in the states for three weeks prior to his mother’s arrival for a Pinot festival. His task was to improve his English. He wasn’t sure whether he’d join this family’s wine empire but eagerly shared his interest in tennis. He proudly told us that he had met Rafael Nadal at Paris’ famed Roland Garros.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THREE DAYS of soaking in great Pinot and meeting really interesting and enthusiastic people, we made a side trip. It’s unthinkable visitors would soak in Portland’s fabulous Pearl District for the arts and culture or the great Pinot Noir of the Willamette Valley and not visit two of the most beautiful areas in the U.S.

Within an hour of downtown Portland you can visit the majestic Mt. Hood or drive the Columbia River Gorge. Drew and I took our time and shot lots of photos of the incredible views of the Columbia River and the fantastic water falls along the Oregon’s historic riverbank highway. We drove the river 20-plus miles and then up into Mount Hood National Forest to see the snow-capped mountain in late July.

I can’t imagine a more beautiful area than the Columbia River Gorge and Mt. Hood.

I can’t imagine better Pinot than what’s produced in the Willamette Valley.

And I can’t imagine a better experience than meeting the great people Drew and I met during our wine vacation. ■