

## Abstract

Grüner Veltliner, probably the most important grape for the Austrian wine industry, is found more and more outside its habitat. Since a decade or two it is gaining popularity in the Pacific northwest, including the Willamette Valley in Oregon. This AVA has a worldwide reputation for Pinot Noir, with investments from some important Burgundy houses as an example. Pinot Noir wines make up more than 60% of the production in Willamette, so even more dominant than Grüner in Austria. There are also excellent whites produced with Pinot Gris and Chardonnay taking the lead but also excellent Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Blanc wines. Indeed, the wine industry in Oregon had a couple of false starts but since the sixties things are on the up for good. Of course, a wine industry of only about 50 years old is still very young. We could call it experimental phase, despite the growing reputation of the Pinots. And yes, the whole Willamette AVA is producing less wine than lower Austria produces Grüner. There is still an enormous growth potential, few sites that are fit for wine have been developed, many are in fact converted farms. A good example is the Stoller site in Dundee that used to be a turkey farm. Pinots are getting prime prices so planting white grape varieties has a reason or is a gamble. Chardonnay came together with the Pinot Noir but was not always planted wisely, although there are many great Chardonnay wines.

From a climatological perspective, it was indeed not so strange to check out Grüner, the important grape varieties are all cool climate. But, there is some confusion with the broader public as they believe Washington is too cold for winemaking. Northern Oregon is much cooler than most of Washington, hence the surprise that Bordeaux and Rhone varieties grow north of the Oregon Pinot. The Willamette runs parallel with the Pacific and the region actually gets a lot rain, fortunately at the right time of the year but not every year is optimal. There have been vintages that were hit by Autumn rain when the Summer was not so great.

The Pacific northwest is a mix of mountains with volcanos, because of the plate tectonics, and arid areas, cold deserts. A gigantic glacier used to cover Washington and large parts of Oregon. The Columbia river, joined by the Willamette at Portland, was basically a melting river from this glacier. There are similarities with lower Austria, like the creation of Loess in some pockets. The soil of Oregon is not just volcanic as many think, in Willamette there are in fact 3 major soil types important in relation to wine. The oldest are the marine sediments, from the ocean plate pushing up. Then there are the volcanic types, derived from weathering basalt over time, and the youngest, the Loess-based soils, relevant to the Grüner. But not all Grüner is planted on Loess, there is no strong link, yet.

But who came up with the idea to plant or graft Grüner in Oregon and Willamette? Was it some diehard Austrians that wanted to import part of home or was it another UC Davis experiment to see what use could be made of Oregon? Most UC Davis scientists were very sceptical about wine making in Willamette valley until 2 runaways proved them wrong and set up Pinot Noir in the mid-sixties, we all know the result. There is evidence that the Grüner came from more than one source, two, possibly three. Material from UC Davis was indeed planted in Oregon, first in Southern Oregon and then in Willamette. At least one Austrian brought cuttings into Willamette directly and distributed to interested parties. Possibly, some material migrated from the northeast of the US or Canada into Oregon, after being introduced there from Austria, but I could not find strong links for that. Grüner is still small scale in Willamette but if it would become bigger someone may want to do a study using DNA analysis to see where it all came from.

Production of Grüner wines in Willamette seem to have started in the mid-nineties, for own use, friends and family. A decade later, wines are getting commercialized at small scale by a handful producers. Meantime, south of Willamette, at least one producer is making a name for himself with producing great Grüner (and just named 2017 Northwest winery of the year by Winepress). Willamette was the first AVA in Oregon and surely most winemakers were focussed on that while Southern Oregon was more experimental, it still is today. But Grüner seems to be rising in Willamette, at least there is a small hype, wines selling out fast, people writing about food pairing, Grüner (from Austria as well) being popular in the Portland restaurant scene. And winemakers are planting more. Is it just the growing popularity of Willamette or is Grüner rising faster? The next couple of years will tell.

It looks like Grüner did not arrive in Oregon and Willamette by accident. There are elements that can contribute to its success and there were, and there are people that believe in its potential. Vintage variety has created a number of styles, from a crispy style as found in Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal over a rounder Weinviertel to more exotic and tropical fruit-driven examples. I think the discovery phase is still ongoing with a couple of houses trying to define a house style. Also, production is still quite small and for now it is a niche product.