



View of Vineyard Looking Up From Tasting Room

BENTON-LANE WINERY

A SOUTH LINN COUNTY TREASURE

I had the pleasure of spending a Saturday afternoon recently with Steve Girard of Benton-Lane Winery, located at the very southern end of Linn

County south of Monroe, and he took the time to take me through the vineyard and also to show me the winemaking process at his winery.

Steve and Carol Girard have been owners of Benton-Lane since 1988. Carol and Steve shared a passionate desire to produce great Pinot Noir but, after careful consideration, they decided their home state California was probably not the best place in which to make it. Instead they looked north towards Oregon where the cooler climate offered the possibility of producing Pinot Noir with better balance and structure, and more interesting flavors than they felt would be possible in California. After considerable research and countless months of looking at possible properties throughout Oregon's Willamette Valley, Carol and Steve discovered an old sheep ranch called "Sunnymount" in the southern Willamette Valley, near the village of Monroe.

It was immediately apparent "Sunnymount" held great potential as a vineyard site. The property is in the foothills of the costal mountain range on the west side of the valley with hillsides sloping east by southeast, a perfect orientation for planting Pinot Noir. The soils are deep, well drained, Bellpine and Jory clay-loam soils, again ideal for grape cultivation. And just as exciting was the reason the property was named Sunnymount in the first place.

Sunnymount Ranch got its name from the fact that the property sits due east from some of the highest peaks in the costal range in what climatologists call the "rain shadow". These high peaks tend to part the marine cloud layer that flows in from the Pacific Ocean, leaving Sunnymount sunnier than most of the surrounding area, hence the name Sunnymount. These sunny slopes offered the potential of earlier ripening of grapes increasing the chances of being able to complete the harvest before the fall rains make their traditional visits.

Sunnymount straddled the border between Benton and Lane counties with some of the land being in each, and so the name Benton-Lane was born. Carol and Steve purchased the property in 1988 and planting of Pinot Noir commenced in 1989. Over the years the vineyard has grown to 128 acres predominantly planted to Pinot Noir with 7 distinct clones on a wide variety of rootstocks carefully matched to the planting location.

Benton-Lane's first vintage was 1992 which was custom produced at another local winery. This custom production process continued until 1997 when the Benton-Lane winery was constructed. Designed by award winning architect Rob Thallon, Benton-Lane Winery offered an exceptional, functional winemaking environment while fitting harmoniously in to the agricultural character of the surrounding area.

Benton-Lane produced Pinot Noir exclusively until 2003, when small quantities of Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc were produced from small 1D2 acre experimental plantings of each in the Benton-Lane vineyard. These wines were sold exclusively in

the tasting room. In 2004, the winery began full-scale commercial production of Pinot Gris from grapes purchased from carefully selected Willamette Valley growers. Benton-Lane wines are now distributed in 46 states and several international markets.

All great winemaking begins in the vineyard. Damian North, Benton-Lane's winemaker, and Matt Compton, Vineyard Manager, work closely together to ensure the grapes that arrive at the winery during harvest are at the optimal level of maturity to produce wines of the highest possible quality. The interaction between the vineyard and the winery extends throughout the entire year because virtually every decision made in the vineyard has potential to impact the ultimate quality of the wine.

In the case of Benton-Lane Pinot Noir, their Estate Vineyard sits directly up-hill from the winery. During the harvest, picking is coordinated carefully to keep pace with the winemaking activities so the grapes are at the optimal level of ripeness and freshness to make the finest possible Pinot Noir.

Great Pinot Noir is made with a gentle touch at Benton-Lane. The grapes, fresh from their vineyard, are first sorted by hand to remove any immature clusters, leaves, or other undesirable material. Then the grape clusters are de-stemmed leaving mostly whole grapes to be fermented. They utilize two different fermentation techniques in the winery. On many lots of grapes, they use the traditional, very small lot, hands-on technique that has been used for centuries to make the world's finest Pinot Noir. They utilize 1¼ ton open top fermenters and the cap of skins, pulp and seeds that float to the surface of the fermenting wine is "punched down" by hand to get optimum extraction of flavor and color from the skins. Benton-Lane's "First Class" Pinot Noir is produced utilizing this method because of the richness and concentration it produces.

The silky, velvety character that is the hallmark of Benton-Lane's Estate Pinot Noir can be, in part, attributed to their use of the innovative fermentation technique, "pneumatage". Benton-Lane has partnered with Pulse-Air Systems, Inc. in the development of this method for gently extracting the flavor and color from the grape skins during fermentation while minimizing the amount of potentially harsh, bitter tannins from the grape seeds that enter the wine. This revolutionary technique involves forming very large air bubbles in the bottom of a tank of fermenting Pinot Noir. These bubbles rise through the wine and gurgle through the cap of grapes gently extracting the flavor and color. The process is so gentle that most of the grape seeds remain within the skins minimizing the extraction of their bitter tannins into the wine. The health of the yeast in the fermenting wine benefits from the oxygen in the air bubbles that pass through wine during pneumatage. Healthy yeast produces higher quality wine with less likelihood of flavor robbing anomalies.

Benton-Lane Pinot Noir ages between 10 and 15 months in barrels using a combination of new and used French oak barrels that are carefully maintained to ensure fresh clean flavors in the wine. Barrels made from oak from different French forests impart



View of Vineyard Looking East



BENTON-LANE WINERY

different flavors and textures to the wine, and they carefully select a variety of different ones to enhance the Pinot Noir's complexity and flavor. Also, the techniques different coopers (barrel makers) utilize in making the barrels actually

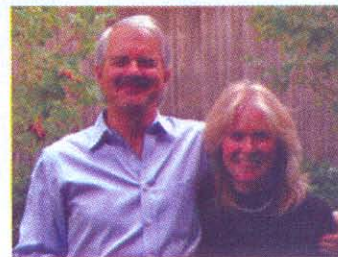
has an effect on how the barrels age wine. Consequently, they purchase barrels from several different coopers in the proportion their winemaker chooses to best compliment their wine style and flavor profile.

Their Pinot Gris is produced from grapes purchased from carefully selected Willamette Valley growers. Benton-Lane's winemaker and vineyard manager work closely with their Pinot Gris growers to make sure the highest quality standards are met. Growers are encouraged to pursue the same environmentally friendly, sustainable farming methods they employ here in their Estate Vineyard at Benton-Lane.

Benton-Lane's winemaker and vineyard manager work carefully with Pinot Gris growers to ensure the vineyards are carefully maintained and the grapes are harvested at the peak of maturity. The whole grape clusters are loaded directly into the press so the resulting juice has minimal contact with the skins because the skins contain bitter phenolic compounds that could be detrimental to the wine quality. The majority of the Pinot Gris juice is fermented in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks at a very cool temperature to maintain the fresh flavors and aromas of the fruit. A small portion of the juice is barrel fermented to add greater depth and complexity to the wine without overpowering the delightful fresh fruit flavors.

The owners of Benton-Lane, know that they will not own the vineyard forever. Ownership will change over eternity. They consider themselves merely custodians of the property. It is their duty to take as good a care of the land as possible until passing the land on to the next custodian. Benton-Lane was one of the first vineyards to use a weed burner. Instead of relying on

chemicals to kill weeds, this uses propane to keep down weed growth. It's more expensive than chemicals, but it is better for the soil. Benton-Lane is proud to have been certified by LIVE and Salmon Safe, but what does this all mean?



Steve & Carol Girard

Benton-Lane vineyards are LIVE! Low Input Viticulture and Enology, Inc. (LIVE, Inc.) is an Oregon sustainable agriculture program providing vineyards and wineries with official recognition for agricultural practices that produce high quality food and other products by using natural resources and regulating mechanisms to replace polluting inputs. LIVE, Inc. is certified by the International Organization for Biological Control and is modeled after international standards of integrated production.

Since 1996 Benton-Lane Winery has partnered with Salmon-Safe to restore and protect water quality in our watersheds, thus benefiting the native salmon in our region. By controlling erosion and runoff from our hillside vineyards we are able to help assure a cool and clean environment for salmon eggs to hatch undisturbed. Benton -Lane vineyards are Certified Salmon Safe.

Benton-Lane Winery is easy to find. Once you are in Monroe, on Highway 99W look for Territorial Road and head south about a mile and a half and you'll be there. Take the time to stop and enjoy the wonderful view along with the tasty home grown Oregon Wines at Benton-Lane. If you would like more information head to their website at www.benton-lane.com or call them at 541-847-5792. The tasting room is open from Noon to 5 PM daily May through November, and December through April they are open Monday through Friday from Noon to 4:30 PM.

This is most definitely a winery that is a must stop. Take the time to explore the little South Linn County community of Monroe, and make sure to stop at Benton-Lane Winery.