

From a Paris Dinner to the Willamette Valley

What the World of Bacchic Brotherhoods Makes Possible

By Sandra



Ken and Denis at the entrance of Yamhill Valley Vineyards.

Some of the best trips of a wine lover's life are not planned by a travel agent. They begin with a conversation over a shared table, among people who speak the same language of wines, ceremony and **generosity**. Mine began in April, at the Castello di Grinzane Cavour in Piedmont, where I was inducted as a *Cavaliere dell'Ordine del Tartufo e dei Vini di Alba*. My Dutch godfather within the order, **Wouter**, introduced me that day to **Marc**, president of the **FICB**. It was a brief exchange, but the beginning of a story within the wine brotherhoods.

Two months later, Marc invited me to Paris, to a Chapter of *Le Conseil des Échansons de France*. I accepted with pleasure, curious to discover another brotherhood. Somewhere between the courses and the toasts, the conversation drifted from ceremony to travel plans for the summer, and I mentioned the trip I had been thinking about since I took the WSET Level 3 course: Oregon and its Pinot Noir estates. What drew me there was a parallel I had made between Nebbiolo in the Langhe and Pinot Noir in Burgundy, two grapes so closely tied to their individual parcels, and I was curious to see how it played out in Oregon. Marc did not hesitate. "Call Ken," he said. "Il est incroyable." He was right.

Ken is the Oregon Wine Brotherhood's delegate to the FICB and one of the most generous ambassadors any wine region could hope for. On the strength of Marc's introduction, he opened his calendar, his contacts and the doors to very private visits, with owners and winemakers setting aside dedicated time to meet us. What followed was not a tasting tour. It was a two-day immersion into the soul of Oregon Pinot Noir.

At **Torii Mor**, a serene estate built around a Japanese garden, owners Donald and Leigh opened the doors especially for us, and winemaker Jon and sales director Nicolas, a fellow Frenchman, walked us through a tasting right beside the vines. At **Yamhill Valley Vineyards**, Denis welcomed us personally. He and his wife Elaine left Washington, D.C. for the Willamette Valley to plant grapes and start winemaking, a reminder of what Oregon winemaking really asks of those who choose it: a life of learning, patience and passion.

The next morning, Bill, the owner of **Holloran Vineyard Wines**, generously shared his time and expertise in vine growing and winemaking, including how he planted Tempranillo in the Willamette Valley. We closed the trip at **Stoller Family Estate**, where we enjoyed an outstanding cellar tasting of some of their signature wines, including a 2021 White Pinot Noir which instantly became “my new obsession”.

None of this would have happened through a standard tasting-room booking. It happened because a Dutch knight introduced me to a French federation president at a castle in Piedmont; because that president, over dinner in Paris, explained that as a Knight of Alba I could count on the support of the other wine brotherhoods, and trusted me enough to let me contact Ken in his name; and because Ken, in turn, opened doors that no itinerary could have booked on its own.

This, I think, is one of the reasons the FICB and its member confréries exist. Beyond the ceremony, the regalia and the banquets, these brotherhoods are living networks of trust and passionate people that connect the wine world's regions to one another, often invisibly, one introduction at a time. In a wine world that talks so often about terroir, this human terroir deserves just as much attention.

So here is my invitation to fellow members. Talk about your travel plans at the table: you never know what could be waiting around the corner. Reach out to your counterparts in other brotherhoods, and go with curiosity and respect. And when you have received, give back. This trip confirmed my own wish to one day open doors, with the same passion, to the best wineries of the Langhe and Roero, the region where the heart of the Knights of Alba beats, and mine too. I hope to go back to Oregon someday, bringing fellow *confrères* with me. My warmest thanks to Wouter, to Marc, and above all to Ken, who turned one introduction into two unforgettable days.