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Oregon Pioneer

With his expressive Pinot Noirs, Ken Wright has helped map the *terroir* of Willamette Valley

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Ken Wright made his way to Oregon in 1985 in a dilapidated pickup truck with his wife, two young sons and 10 barrels of California Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. It was an unlikely beginning to a career that's helped establish the state's Willamette Valley as a homeland for Pinot Noir. But it says a lot about Ken Wright.

The 61-year-old winegrower has proved to be pragmatic and persuasive. When his bank account could not finance the move to Oregon, he convinced his former employer, Talbott Vineyards, to let him take those barrels with him to sell when he started in Oregon. Though

prohibited by several federal regulations, he convinced a federal agent to let him bottle and label the wines in 1986 as the debut offerings of his new winery, Panther Creek.

Those character traits have also served him well in his dedication to Oregon and its *terroir*, the notion that the growing site defines a wine's character. He championed single-vineyard Pinot Noirs well before it was fashionable in Oregon and, in a signature achievement, campaigned successfully to get his fellow vintners to agree on a set of six landmark sub-appellations in the northern Willamette Valley, fully enacted in 2005. (See "[Defining the Northern Willamette Valley](#)".)

"We always called him the brinksman," says Rollin Soles, co-founder of Argyle and co-owner of Roco Wines, who counts Wright as a friend since college. "He's the guy to take everything to the edge, and you think, "No way can he pull this off," and sure enough at the eleventh hour he does."

In his 30 years in Oregon, Wright has exerted a huge influence on the state's winemaking. He introduced now-familiar ideas such as sorting lines to ensure only sound grapes go into the fermentors and using dry ice to cool grapes before the onset of fermentation.

He has also been on the cutting edge of vineyard improvements. As early as 1994 he paid growers by the acre instead of by the ton, so they could farm for quality instead of high yields. He was among the first in Oregon to use vertical shoot-positioning to expose more of the grape bunches to sunlight. Today, he's knee-deep in research to link characteristics in his wines to the microbial and mineral content of vineyard soils.

Wright made Panther Creek into a bellwether Oregon winery, but the cost was high, including his first marriage, and eventually the winery. But a casual family dinner one recent autumn evening at Wright's home, which sits at the crown of a hill adjacent to his estate vineyards, validates his vision.

On the table are a pair of 2008 Ken Wright Pinot Noirs that demonstrate the primacy of site. A bottling from Carter Vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA, supple and seductive, contrasts with the taut tannins of the one from Freedom Hill, about 15 miles south of Carter. Though Wright had poured the wines for pleasure, not as evidence for his belief in *terroir*, the two glasses of brilliant ruby wine would convince any skeptic.

Wright took a winding path to Oregon. His parents were students at the University of Illinois when he was born, in 1954. His father later played professional baseball in the St. Louis Cardinals organization, rising to the AAA level in Louisville until a broken leg ended his athletic career. As a marketing executive, the elder Wright moved the family from state to state.

Ken wrestled competitively wherever he was, from the sixth grade to his first year of college, winning a state championship as a high school junior in Wheeling, Ill., a suburb of Chicago. In his senior year, in Louisville, he met Alan Holstein, a star football player who also wrestled. Holstein took Wright under his wing. "I had a massive afro, and no one knew what to make of me," Wright recalls. "But Alan and I got to be friends and we ended up rooming together at the University of Kentucky."

It was there Holstein and Wright both discovered wine. "I got a job waiting tables at The Fig Tree, a continental restaurant that was the best in Kentucky at the time," says Wright. He convinced the owner, Stan Pikarski, that the waitstaff would sell more bottles of wine if they knew how they tasted. "One day a week, we'd taste all the wines from one region on the list. That was my introduction to wine."

Holstein was majoring in horticulture, and eventually focused on grapevines. His drink of choice in college was rosé by Mateus or Lancer's, until Wright came home with a bottle of Beaujolais. "Wow, that was different," Holstein recalls. "Eventually we got fascinated with Burgundy."

Wright and Holstein talked the university into letting them conduct a non-credit course in wine appreciation. "We would read a chapter in a book and pretend we knew what we were talking about," Holstein says. They also were allowed to buy Burgundian classics such as La Tâche and Richebourg, which had not yet skyrocketed to their current stratospheric prices. "That's how we got bit by the Pinot Noir bug," adds Holstein.

Wright helped Holstein plant an experimental vineyard at Kentucky, and recalls a research visit to nearby Cane Ridge where a young winemaker named Helen Turley climbed out of a tank she was cleaning. Hybrids, she cautioned them, were the only wine grapes that would grow there.

"The diseases were horrendous from the humidity," Wright remembers, "and the chemicals we had to use were as bad as the disease. Being a city boy, I'd never farmed anything, but I really enjoyed getting dirty and watching something grow."

Wright gave up his pre-law studies (which he admits he only took because he thought Perry Mason was cool) and limped across the continent in a beat-up car to enroll in enology and viticulture at University of California, Davis. Within a month, the girlfriend who accompanied him had left.

"The weather was brutal," Wright shrugs. "One hundred and sixteen degrees the day we arrived in Davis. But I stayed. I just knew I wanted to grow grapes and make wine."

In the late 1970s, working his first full-time wine job, assistant winemaker at Ventana Vineyards in Monterey County, Wright fell in with California Pinot Noir pioneers. Among them was Dick Graff, the founder of Chalone, which at the time produced its Gavilan brand wines at Ventana. Graff invited Wright to join a group of winemakers who met regularly to compare research on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, among them Josh Jensen and Steve Doerner from nearby Calera; Rich Sanford and Larry Brooks from Acacia; and Sonoma's Steve Kistler.

Jensen remembers it well. "We looked at malolactic fermentations, filtration yes or no, commercial yeast strains. We called it the Small Winery Technical Society, and had ambitious plans to publish papers. The grand ambition was never realized, but we learned a lot from each other over all-day meetings and lunches.

"Ken was a shining example," Jensen adds. "He was pretty quiet, but he was obviously a smart guy. He had his eyes and ears open, and he was doing the work. Today, I consider him at the absolute pinnacle of winemakers in Oregon."

It's hard to believe, given his later trenchant research in viticulture and enology, that Wright had difficulties with science classes at Davis. "I had no chemistry background," Wright protests. But it's how he and Rollin Soles bonded.

"As a teaching assistant in microbiology," says Soles, "I spent so much time getting him over the hump with chemistry it was hilarious. But you know how you hit it off with someone right away? That's what it was with Ken."

Holstein moved to Oregon in 1979, managing vineyards for Knudsen-Erath. Wright was taken with the Pinots he tasted with Holstein on visits. "There was a luscious quality to them of perfectly ripened fruit, not green, not overripe, just dead-ripe fruit. I knew I wanted something that was nimble, and alive," Wright says.

He didn't think he could achieve that in California. "After having those wines, I knew I wanted to be in Oregon," Wright says. "I just had to wait until I could afford it."

Finally, in 1985, Wright could wait no longer. He loaded up his truck with those barrels of Cabernet and Merlot to have something to sell as a first vintage, and set up shop in a vacant warehouse in McMinnville, Ore. The local Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent, Ron Fitzgerald, patiently explained why Wright could not sell the undocumented wine, yet he eventually took pity. Panther Creek, which would become famous for Pinot Noir, launched with a 1984 California Cabernet blend.

Panther Creek's debut Pinot Noir 1986 was tough and overly extracted, but by 1990 the wines were gaining polish and elegance, with rich fruit and seductive textures. That year, the owners of another startup winery, Domaine Serene, contracted with Wright to make their first few vintages at Panther Creek.

But although Wright was making good progress with his wines, his finances and his personal life were not going so well.

His business partner in Panther Creek was his first wife, Corby. Friends in high school, they reconnected in the Bay Area and married in 1980. They had two sons. But by 1989, having drifted apart as Wright worked long hours at the winery while Corby held a full-time job as managing editor of a local weekly newspaper, they had divorced. "We remain friends," says Corby, "and really raised the kids together."

To finance increased production of his Panther Creek wines he took in another partner, Steve Lind. A dentist in Salem, Lind was supposed to be a silent partner, but by 1993 their disagreements got to the point where Wright bought out Lind's share, even though he could not really afford it.

"I wrote a letter to every futures buyer, got a second mortgage, and offered to reimburse every single customer with a personal check," Wright says. Most people said thanks but they really preferred to receive the wine. Unable to pay his growers their full due, he got them to delay their compensation. Wright paid the growers in full when he sold Panther Creek in 1994 to Ron and Linda Kaplan.

By then, Wright was ready to turn another page in his life. In 1992, he joined a local amateur softball team and met the team's organizer, Karen Stecker. Born in Idaho, she had grown up in the Bay Area, then studied commercial interior design at San Jose State University. Adept at architectural drawings, she operated a successful design firm in McMinnville. Smitten with each other, they married in 1995.

The next year, they opened Ken Wright Cellars. They retrofitted the defunct Portland Glove Company, a brick-façade factory building at the crossroads of tiny Carlton, just north of McMinnville, into a winery. Karen soon put her design chops to work repurposing an old barn next to the railroad tracks, planning every detail of a new winery, which was completed in 1999. She even revamped the old railroad station across the street into a welcoming tasting room.

With Ken Wright Cellars, a winemaking style came into focus: Pinots with pinpoint flavors and generosity, without excessive alcohol, tannins or acidity. The wines have also proven to age well for eight to 15 years.

"Pinot Noir in Oregon, harvested at the right time, has this fabulous fresh fruit profile, ripe but not into the dried fruit area," Wright says. "Our autumns are cooler [than California's], so there is a longer window for what we want from our vineyards before the grapes get overripe. I want the weight of the wine to be not too heavy or too light, supple on the palate, as seamless as possible."

The wines are polished enough to drink early, which makes them catnip for restaurants. "We may be sacrificing some ageability past 20 years or something like that, but we're not sacrificing quality. Grippy and tannic does not provide pleasure."

He's experimented with fermenting on the stems, but doesn't like it in his wines. "I like other people's wines that do, but when I try it the wines are too angular, too hard."

Over the years he has cut back on the use of new oak barrels, as have many Oregon vintners. He also employs a technique that he learned from Burgundian winemaker André Porcheret, formerly of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, for preparing the barrels with salt and hot water to reduce the green, resinous character perceived in wines as "woody."

Though it began humbly, the operation is now akin to a Burgundy négociant-domaine. Between Savoya and Canary Hill (in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA), the Wrights own 36 acres of vines, and they buy from 11 other vineyards that each yield a unique single-vineyard bottling. They produce 13,000 cases per year under the Ken Wright label. A second label, Tyrus Evan, accommodates the occasional experiment with warm-climate varietals made from vineyards in Washington and southern Oregon.

Ken Wright Cellars has become a model of consistent excellence, producing 111 wines rated "outstanding" (90 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale) in 18 vintages.

For all his fascination with vineyards, Wright maintains that it was never his intention to focus on vineyard-designated wines.

In the 1980s, only a few Oregon wines were labeled with a specific vineyard. At Panther Creek in 1990, Wright was being flooded by two lots, one from grapes grown at Canary Hill, the other from Carter. Though they are close and are both on Jory soils, a common type in Willamette Valley, Canary Hill faces east, Carter southwest.

"What was remarkable was the structure," he says. "Carter gets the super hot part of the day. In the vineyard you can feel a noticeable difference in the quality of the skins. Canary Hill's are thinner and more delicate. There's more tannin in Carter, no doubt about it." He has continued to make wines from these sites as his roster of vineyards has expanded.

In looking for sites that appealed to him for the long-term, he noticed a pattern. Vineyards in volcanic soils like Jory tended to be more fruit driven, while those on marine sediments were more floral and spice driven. "And even within those divisions, each location had its signature that came from that place. It wasn't my hand, it was the place," Wright says.

He discovered that knowing the vineyard source made the experience of drinking the wine richer for him, so he bottled them separately. His customers, he learned, shared his enthusiasm. "It was awesome," he recalls. "It was what we wanted to provide."

At Panther Creek, Wright was buying grapes. After he and Karen launched Ken Wright Cellars, they began to acquire vineyards and sign long-term deals. They bought Canary Hill in 1985. They agreed to leases of 30 years or longer with Guadalupe, McCrone, Carter, Bonnie Jean and Tanager. They also make single-vineyard bottlings from Shea, Nysa, Freedom Hill, Meredith Mitchell, Bryce, Angela and Abbott Claim.

In 1998, they bought a 40-acre orchard that once grew filberts, cherries and plums but had been abandoned for 25 years. "I was at an open house, talking with an art merchant, who confided she was going through a divorce. She knew she was going to end up with the property and wanted Karen and me to have it. She had just built a house on the property two years before.

"It was a southeast slope, my favorite facing. At 450 feet, it was a perfect elevation. We took core samples, measured the depth to mother rock, and it was consistent across the ridge. It was just a gorgeous site. A year later she called, ready to sell. She put a number on the price, and we agreed."

The Wrights named it Savoya, because Wright and a vineyard worker noticed a pungent aroma of wild onions as they were planting the Pinot Noir vines. "I asked him how you say 'onion' in Spanish. He said, '*cebolla*.' That sounded like 'Savoya' to me." The Wrights now live in the house.

In 2000, Wright bought a 200-acre parcel on a long, dramatic ridge in the Yamhill-Carlton District. He planted half and called it Abbott Claim Vineyard and sold the other half to Tony Soter, who planted his Mineral Springs Ranch Vineyard there.

"Then the old guy next door said he might know someone who knew how to buy the remaining 200 acres on the ridge," Wright recounts. The buyer was businessman Anthony Beck, a South Africa native now based in Kentucky, where he owns the thoroughbred horse farm Gainesway. (He's also owner of Graham Beck winery in South Africa, founded by his father.) Wright

planted 34 acres of that site for Beck, who named the vineyard after his wife, Angela. Last year Beck bought Abbott Claim. Wright still manages both vineyards, buys Abbott Claim grapes for his own label and makes Angela for the Becks.

In managing his own vineyards, and those among the long-term leases that employ him for vineyard management (including Guadalupe, McCrone, Tanager, Bryce, Bonnie Jean and Abbott Claim), Wright practices what he calls nutrition-based farming. Following the ideas of Arden Andersen, a soil scientist and medical doctor, nutrition-based farming focuses on the biological life within the soil. "What's most important is to do nothing that diminishes the microbial activity in your soil, all the way down to the rock," Wright says.

Wright adjusts with organic amendments such as chicken manure or fish meal to get mineral content into healthy ranges. To deliver those minerals to the vine, Wright says, bacterial activity needs to break down these elements into ions. "The goal is to figure out what the vine is taking, and what's the balance point, and know what to add. I like it because it's not hocus pocus."

For proof he points to Carter Vineyard. "Carter began to get quiet on us in the '90s. The fruit became less expressive. A soil scientist from Oregon State University dug a bunch of holes and told us we didn't have any microbiology or life in the soil. We started to focus on that, including directly injecting live biology [insects and bacteria] into the soil."

Carter wines from the mid-1990s developed funky characters in the bottle. Recent vintages are much cleaner and more expressive; the 2004, for example, earned a 93-point rating. A delicate Pinot, it weaves a gorgeous thread of blackberry, currant and vaguely minty flavors through a long, velvety finish. "Carter," says Wright, "was an important lesson for us."

Bryce, a vineyard in Ribbon Ridge, recently joined Wright's roster. "It looked sick," Wright says, "but it was a good location. For five years we plowed a ton of money in amendments into the vineyard. This year, it turned around. It was an aggressive approach, but it paid off. The wines are clean, they're fruit-filled, no reduction, no funky vegetal qualities like we had."

Back in 1994, Wright was the first vintner to vineyard-designate Pinot Noir from Shea Vineyard. On sedimentary soils, Shea was planted in 1989, when only bulk producers wanted the grapes and volcanic soils such as Jory were all the rage.

To make ends meet, owner Dick Shea had to produce as much as 5 tons per acre. But Wright agreed to pay by the acre, allowing Shea the leeway to get the per-acre yields closer to 2 tons. Wright's 1994 Shea Vineyard bottling was a head-turner. Rich and complex, it layered spicy berry and cherry flavors with meaty, smoky, slightly herbal notes.

"Of course the wine was much better," says Shea. "It was more concentrated and flavorful. Someone had to believe in it and pay the money and take the risk to make it work. Ken alone was willing to give us a shot."

Now Shea sells to more A-list wineries than any other vineyard in Oregon.

Carlton, first known as Carl's Town and incorporated in 1899, is a sleepy farming hamlet of about 2,000 souls. Making its way past forests and vineyards from McMinnville, the two-lane Tualatin Valley Highway enters Carlton as it reaches the Ken Wright Cellars winery, jogs to the west two blocks, then continues past the Carlton Bakery (known for its raisin-walnut loaf) before heading north toward Yamhill.

"Carlton is a real town," says Wright. "Being isolated, it's its own self. It has small schools where kids from all walks of life are friends."

The Wrights live in the rambling home on Savoya Vineyard with daughters Josie, 14, and Evy, 8, both adopted from Vietnam.

Wright's sons—Cody, 35, and Carson, 31—are making their own waves, Cody with his Purple Hands label and Carson as an innovative beverage-packaging executive. (Both sons are from Ken's marriage to Corby Stonebraker, who is now married to Rollin Soles and partners with him on their Roco winery.)

When he isn't drinking his own wines, Wright admits that his favorites are mature Champagnes and French whites. "I love old Champagne when it becomes kind of nutty," he says. "I could drink Alsatian whites and Étienne Sauzet white Burgundies for the rest of my life."

Wright maintains a relatively small wine cellar at home, about 1,200 bottles. Consisting mostly of whites, it contains few Ken Wright wines, an artifact of the winemaker's cash-strapped beginnings. "When I started at Panther Creek I was doing everything myself, and I was waiting tables and consulting," he says. "To make ends meet, I had to sell every bottle I made for many years. When somebody wants to buy our wine, I have a hard time saying no."

For his 50th birthday, Karen secretly began buying Wright wines under her brother's name. It took several years to accumulate an impressive collection of magnums. They drank a few, but many of the bottles have since been donated to charity auctions.

The people who work at the winery are more than staff; they're almost like family. Alberto Salazar, originally from Guadalajara, was working a bottling-line job in 1997 when Ken saw something in him and promoted him to cellar master, a position he still holds. Ivory Duyn, whose title is "winery ambassador," started as an intern at 14; last year Ken officiated at her wedding. When Wright hired Mark Gould as vineyard manager, he was executive chef at Atwater's in Portland, Ore. On a joint family vacation in Montana, Wright offered the job, despite Gould's lack of formal training. "I set him up with growers, who taught him what they knew," Wright explains.

"Ken always has looked for people with great character," says Karen, "and then done whatever it takes to train them to do what needs to be done."

It's not how most businesses run, but it works for Wright. And why shouldn't it? He's spent his entire career shaking things up.

Recent Releases From Ken Wright

In the chart below, all wines are priced at \$63 unless otherwise indicated. All wines carry Oregon appellations except the Chardonnay, made from Washington-grown grapes. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

Score	Wine
94	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District McCrone Vineyard 2012
94	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Savoya Vineyard 2012
93	Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Freedom Hill Vineyard 2012
93	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Abbott Claim Vineyard 2012
93	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Bonnie Jean Vineyard 2012
92	Pinot Noir McMinnville Meredith Mitchell Vineyard 2012
92	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Shea Vineyard 2012
92	Chardonnay Washington Celilo Vineyard 2011 (\$32)
91	Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Nysa Vineyard 2012
91	Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Canary Hill Vineyard 2012
91	Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Carter Vineyard 2012
91	Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Guadalupe Vineyard 2012
91	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton District Tanager Vineyard 2012
89	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge Bryce Vineyard 2012
88	Pinot Blanc Willamette Valley 2012 (\$24)

See Also

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