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Walter Scott – weight with weightlessness

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From a tiny Oregon winery bursting at the seams, Ken Pahlow and Erica Landon are producing distinguished single-vineyard Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines that combine intensity and elegance.

Hearing the name Walter Scott, many Brits, especially Scots, may think of the Scottish historical novelist, poet, playwright and historian (1771–1832) famous for works such as *Waverley*, *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*.

However, last year I was thrilled to discover, thanks to an introduction made by their UK importer Justerini & Brooks, that it's also the name chosen by wife and husband Erica Landon and Ken Pahlow (this photo comes from their website, courtesy of Eason Richmond) for their youthful company in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

When I talked to them via Zoom last August, they were about to ‘go off grid’ for a pre-harvest team-building retreat in the the Eagle Cap Wilderness in the Wallowa Mountains, north-eastern Oregon, with their tiny team of five (that’s including them and their six-year-old daughter Lucille, who has a reputation as a pigeage expert). They were expecting to start harvesting in the third and fourth weeks of September and described very small clusters, many with more chicks than hens.

The team is small because their production is small, as is their winery, a former cidery rented from the Casteel family of Bethel Heights, who also own [Justice Vineyard](#), a treasured source of fruit for Walter Scott wines. Working in the winery is like ‘a giant Tetris puzzle’, they tell me. It was designed for 3,000 cases and they now make around 6,000. But the scale means that they can do everything themselves.

Their business partners Andy (CFO) and Sue (legal counsel) Steinman joined them in 2012, a vintage in which Landon and Pahlow between them processed 35 tonnes of fruit on top of their full-time jobs. At that time, Erica was wine director for BCR restaurant group and Pahlow was working in marketing and distribution for Galaxy Wine Company in Portland. It wasn’t until 2014 that they were able to focus entirely on Walter Scott.

They started the company in 2008 with \$20,000 – their retirement funds – and no loans, selling treasured possessions such as bikes and some of the most expensive wines in their collection, eg Rousseau’s 2005 Chambertin, and living in a mobile home. Before they moved production to the cidery, they had made wines in rented spaces, for example at Patricia Green (2009) and Evening Land.

If you want to know why they called their company Walter Scott – nothing to do with the Scottish namesake – there’s a full explanation (and lots of very nice photos) [on their website](#).

They don’t own any land but ‘work with great growers’, some of whom they persuaded to convert to organic farming by raising the price they were willing to pay for the fruit so that growers were willing to make the investment. Some ‘old-timers’ initially shook their heads but are now ‘all in’. They explained that one of the old guard, Kevin Chambers, has even started a permaculture on his new vineyard. And the new generation of some of the growers, eg Freedom Hill, are keen to move forward in the direction of [regenerative agriculture](#) (a likely new entry in the fifth edition of *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, 2023), including cover crops and no till; those crops are mown or crimped, or kept

short by livestock among the vines. You can see how much they value their growers by the amount of space devoted to [vineyards and owners](#) on their website.

Would they like to own their own land? ‘In theory yes but we are a very small team and to bring the farming in house would be challenging.’ They wouldn’t mind having ‘2 ha [5 acres] to play with’ but they also find it exciting to work with a range of different sites; they learn from each of the growers. Erica added, ‘I believe in human terroir, the growers bring their own energy.’

I asked them if they expected a picker shortage in 2020. They thought it would be hard because of social distancing, which might delay delivery of the fruit to the winery. Even though they pay the vineyard owners by area not by volume, the growers pay the pickers by bucket/weight. Thus in a low-yielding year, pickers would probably rather be in other higher-yielding vineyards if they have the choice. At Walter Scott they have a different harvest culture from many of the growers: they see it as ‘a communal celebration rather than a race to pick as quickly as possible’.

They produce exclusively Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, though I noticed that the Combe Verte Chardonnay 2018 included 2% of Aligoté. Their first wines, now their ‘first level’, were La Combe Verte (the name a tribute to Patricia Green), a blend of fruit mostly but not exclusively from Eola-Amity Hills, the southernmost AVA in Willamette Valley. They started producing the Cuvées Anne and Ruth, blends from several vineyards but all within the Eola-Amity Hills AVA, in 2011 as their ‘Reserve’ line, before they were able to start making the single-vineyard wines. These blended cuvées are particularly good value.

Pahlow described the Eola-Amity Hills as ‘volcanic, rocky, with thin topsoil, fractured basalt, influenced by the cooling winds of the [Van Duzer Corridor](#)’, with up to 30 °F (16.5 °C) difference between day and night temperatures. This means the harvest is often 10–14 days behind the Dundee Hills. Nevertheless, they are sometimes accused of picking too early. Based on the wines I tasted, they may pick early but their fruit is certainly fully ripe and beautifully balanced.

For them, 2018 was ‘a classic vintage, the driest on record’. It cooled down in September so they could pick whenever they chose, ripening was gradual, ‘with excellent acid retention and good density in the berries’. This is evident from the

wines I tasted and from the pH levels of their finished 2018s: typically 3.1–3.2 post malo for the Chardonnays and 3.6–3.7 for the Pinots.

In 2018 they started making certain changes in their farming practices in order to keep freshness in their wines. Whereas some growers advocate hanging a larger crop to retain acidity, they were inspired by the naturally lower yields in 2012, 2014 and 2016, which were concentrated but less alcoholic. So they have started to reduce the crop earlier – by up to 20–30% – but they do so before veraison, inspired, they explain, ‘by Burgundy estates such as Roulot and Lafon’ (Pahlow worked with Lafon at Evening Land). They believe this gives them ‘both density and freshness and a higher level of dry extract, weight with weightlessness’.

Pahlow and Landon are particularly enthusiastic about the way the X Novo vineyard (below, also from their website) is planted, with 18–20 different clones. They find that the number of different clones means slightly different levels of ripeness when they harvest. This sounded to me rather like a clonal version of a field blend (of which I am a big fan). X Novo is also planted at a higher density than is locally typical: 3,000 vines/acre (7,400/ha) compared with 1,300 vines/acre. The roots are forced to go deeper.



When I asked them how important was the choice of clone in determining the taste of the wine, they replied that ‘farming and place trump clone’, and the choice of rootstock is vital, especially where there is heat or water stress and the vineyards are dry-farmed (as are all those they buy fruit from, with the exception of X Novo, which is being weaned off irrigation). Last summer they visited Burgundy and Madiran to talk to the growers there about such stresses.

Later-ripening clones and the right rootstock are both critical in the changing climate.

‘It makes me crazy’, says Pahlow, ‘when people do single-clone bottlings. Why would you want a clonal signature on your wine?’ Instead at Walter Scott they seek ‘strength through diversity’ and ‘multiple voices’. Seven Springs Vineyard (which produced my favourites among their wines) comprises five Dijon clones randomly planted. All the fruit is therefore harvested together – they are ‘like instruments in an orchestra ... This leads to balance, with some grapes less ripe than others.’

He added, on a more sympathetic note, that is not surprising that many Oregon vineyards are planted with single clones because it is a young region and pioneering growers such as Adelsheim wanted to find out which clones were best suited to their sites. But there are an increasing number of Pinot and Chardonnay plantings done using [mass selection](#).

In the time since I spoke to them, they have harvested and made wines. Here’s what they say about the 2020 vintage:

‘The size and quality of the grapes was outstanding with lots of hens and chicks. The yields were tiny, the chemistry in the fruit was perfect. We did not end up with much difficulty with pickers as the harvest was drawn out and timing worked in our favour. The smoke effect was extremely varied in the Willamette Valley from appellation to appellation, vineyard to vineyard, and even block by block. We did have blocks that we work with that had a concentration of smoke compounds that was very high and we ended up not picking them.

‘Production is down in 2020: in 2018 we made 66,000 bottles, in 2019 it was just under 60,000 bottles and in 2020 we will be closer to 33,500 bottles.’

Time to buy the 2018s.

The nine wines are listed in the order tasted. Walter Scott's UK importer is Justerini & Brooks. See also [this list of US and international distributors](#). You can also [buy wines direct from them](#), and they are currently offering free ground shipping within the US for orders of six bottles or more.

Walter Scott, La Combe Verte Chardonnay 2018 Willamette Valley

98% Chardonnay, 2% Aligoté. This is Walter Scott's first-level Chardonnay, the only one labelled Willamette Valley rather than Eola-Amity Hills, though all the fruit apart from one parcel (Freedom Hill Vineyard) is from the Eola-Amity Hills, including Sojourner and X Novo. Fermented with 100% ambient yeast, and full malolactic conversion, in large barrels with very little bâtonnage.

Stony citrus with a lovely note of clementine on the nose even though it is not overly fruity. Flinty, reductive style but in a restrained way, not dominating the fruit. Bright, crisp and citrusy with a note of ripe green fruits, like greengage. Doesn't have the intensity of the single-vineyard wines but seems every bit as persistent and well made as the Cuvée Anne, with an excellent balance between fruit and stony freshness. It does not have quite the intensity of that wine though it does have the saltiness of their top wines. The balance is very good in every way: between the fruit and the acidity, the fruit and the winemaking. Mouth-watering and long. Smart wine. **GV (JH)**

13%

Drink 2020 – 2022

16.5

Walter Scott, Cuvée Anne Chardonnay 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

A barrel selection from their best Chardonnay sites X Novo, Sojeau, Seven Springs, Justice Vineyard and Sunset View. According to the producers, Erica Landon and Ken Pahlow, 'It is a blend that represents our vision of Willamette Valley Chardonnay through the lens of the Eola-Amity Hills.' Fermented with ambient yeast and aged in 500- and 350-litre barrels (40% new) for 12 months and finished for 3 months in stainless-steel tank. Minimal lees stirring. pH c 3.15 post malolactic conversion. The wine is named after Erica's mother Anne Hills, who 'supported their dream' to make their own wine.

Complex aroma that starts with a clarion call of lemon/lime and grapefruit, lightly smoky, but opens quickly to a surprisingly deep floral scent as well as creamy spice from the lees and oak, and a definite but not dominant hint of flinty reduction, not full-on struck match but in that direction. That piercing citrus purity and intensity on the palate too, tightly wound, but with a slight peachy richness added to it. The oak is present but it's well judged, adding depth, texture and structure without too much oak flavour. Exceptionally

moreish and has good persistence. May well age longer than I have suggested. In its North American context, **GV**. Tasting it several days after opening, the flinty reductive character seems more marked, suggesting this really does need more time, and will benefit from decanting if you drink it young. (JH)

13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

17

Walter Scott, Cuvée Anne Chardonnay 2017 Willamette Valley

A barrel selection from their best Chardonnay sites X Novo, Sojeau, Seven Springs, Freedom Hill and Justice Vineyard. Fermented with ambient yeast and aged in 500- and 350-litre barrels (part new) for 12 months and finished for 3 months in stainless-steel tank. Minimal lees stirring.

This has a very attractive, subtle reductive smoky aroma. It's there but it does not dominate because with it there's intense citrus, mostly lemon but also clementine, and creaminess from the oak and the lees ageing. Deeply fruited with the struck-match quality showing a little more on the palate but again it is not too much (unless you don't like that characteristic). Zesty, clean-edged freshness to balance the full-flavoured, pure fruit. Delicious and still very youthful. (JH)

13%

Drink 2020– 2025

17

Walter Scott, Seven Springs Vineyard Chardonnay 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

The south ridge of the Seven Springs Vineyard is planted on a rocky volcanic Nekia clay bench that runs along the coveted east slope of the Eola-Amity Hills. The vines get the gentle morning sun and are protected from the intense afternoon heat. Walter Scott is one of the few wineries given access to Seven Springs Vineyard, outside of Evening Land. Fermented with ambient yeast and aged in 500- and 350-litre barrels (40% new) for 12 months and finished for 3 months in stainless-steel tank. Minimal lees stirring. pH c 3.15 post malolactic conversion. 390 cases produced.

This has a little more obvious reductive struck-match character than the Cuvée Anne and a touch more spice, though the former is less obvious after the wine has been aerated. The fruit is still citrus-driven but smells a little richer and broader with a touch of orange and orange pith and even veering towards just-ripe pineapple as it opens, though the winemaking is obscuring some of those fruit aromas at the moment. More savoury and mealy on the palate, a little more chewy, dare I say, more burgundian? Here the freshness is just as intense as in the Cuvée Anne, thanks not only to the acidity but also to a more salty quality on the finish. This certainly has more power and structure, and greater persistence, more sinew than flesh, but I don't think it should be broached for at least a year, preferably two. Mouth-watering and savoury/salty aftertaste. I think this is likely to age the longest of the three Walter Scott Chardonnays tasted but I have not tried vintages with more bottle age. Classy, intense, perfectly balanced already. A real beauty. I love the slight grip in the texture. (JH)

13%

Drink 2021 – 2028

17.5

Walter Scott, X Novo Chardonnay 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

In 2010 Craig Williams, best known for his tenure at Joseph Phelps Vineyards, and his family came to Oregon where they purchased land in Eola-Amity Hills and planted a notably diverse clonal selection of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. X Novo Vineyard is located just down the east ridge of the Eola-Amity Hills from Seven Springs, in an area known as Spring Valley. It sits on the edge of the Holmes Gap, where the Van Duzer wind currents funnel through the rolling hills. This site is perfectly perched at 525 ft in elevation on extremely rocky clays known as Gelderman. The Chardonnay block is planted with almost 20 clones of Chardonnay. Fermented with ambient yeast and aged in 500- and 350-litre barrels (40% new) for 12 months and finished for 3 months in stainless-steel tank. Minimal lees stirring. pH c 3.15 post malolactic conversion. 450 cases produced.

This is definitely the most exotic of the three Walter Scott Chardonnays I am tasting and, at first, the least marked by flinty reduction, though it does have some of that aroma and it seems to show more as the wine warms in the glass. The floral character is more intense, more perfumed with jasmine, than on the Cuvée Anne, though the reduction masks it to some extent, spicy too. More

seductive without suggesting heaviness as some perfumes do. On the palate, there's more stony citrus than I expected after the aroma, a little toasty. I thought at first that it had less persistence than the Seven Springs, less drive on the finish but on the next day, a little warmer, the persistence was remarkable. The power in Seven Springs is in the structure and precision, here it is more in the aroma and breadth while it still has terrific freshness on the finish, with a citrus kick at the end. Somehow manages to be both seductive and cerebral in its appeal. (JH)

13%

Drink 2020– 2028

17.5

Walter Scott, La Combe Verte 2018 Willamette Valley

This is their first-level Pinot Noir, the only one labelled Willamette Valley rather than Eola-Amity Hills.

Mid cherry red. A very burgundian style of Pinot with red-fruit freshness but no otiose sweetness, delicately scented. On the palate, this is just so utterly drinkable: fresh, dark-red fruits, fresh acidity, mild but sufficient and definite tannins so that it is a food wine, at least at the moment, and, simply, a harmonious whole, a lovely Oregon Pinot at around £18 per bottle in bond. Juicy but not simple. It's more about the fruit than the vineyard but none the worse for that – that is the intention, I believe. On the finish the tannins are elegantly dry. **GV** (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2025

16.5

Walter Scott, Cuvée Ruth 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

A selection of barrels from some of their best vineyards in the Eola-Amity Hills, including Seven Springs, Sojourner, Lewman, and, making its Walter Scott debut, X Novo Vineyard Pinot Noir. 30% whole cluster, 10 months in barrel, of which 40% new. pH for their Pinots is 3.6–3.7. Unfined and unfiltered. Cuvée Ruth is a wine dedicated to the memory of Ruth and Irv Kantor, parents of Erica Landon and Ken Pahlow's business partner Sue.

Mid cherry red. Delicate but definite aroma of fresh red fruits, more crunchy than sweet, with a fine scented quality that is both floral and a little stemmy and perhaps very slightly reductive (smoky/mineral) on first opening. Pure-fruited with only very subtle signs of oak on the nose. Pretty yet with depth and elegance and a slight and attractive earthiness. On the palate, the oak shows a little more, perhaps increasing the fruit and tannin structure, though it is not in the least an oaky wine. The structure is also, apparently, to do with the very dry vintage and resultant thick skins. More structured than I expected though it *is* very young. Juicy within that structure and seems to become more savoury on the day after opening. The acidity is lovely, just right to lift the fruit but not exaggerate the tannins. Youthful, of course, but harmonious already. The tannins finish dry yet refined and only just a little chewy for now. The finish is long and mouth-watering, the sweetness of fruit lingering on the finish and perfectly harmonised with the tannins. Not quite ready yet and should age well. (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2026

16.5

Walter Scott, Sojeau Vineyard Pinot Noir 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

Previously known as Sojourner Vineyard, planted by Denny and Thelma Peseau. It sits on the southern end of the Eola-Amity Hills, facing south-west towards the Van Duzer Corridor. At 650 ft in elevation, the site overlooks the valley and surrounding farmlands from its perch on the steep hill. This makes Sojeau one of their coolest sites, thanks to the intense coastal winds. The 15-acre block of Pinot Noir is divided into two blocks from which Walter Scott get 20 rows in a cross-section, allowing them 'to share the full potential of Sojeau's clonal depth and soil diversity'. Fermented with ambient yeast, aged in 228-litre barrels for 15 months. 35% new oak. Unfined and unfiltered. 450 cases produced.

A little deeper in colour than the Seven Springs 2018. Rich in both red and black fruit, the aroma deeper and less playful than on the Seven Springs, darker than the Cuvée Ruth. It's more savoury too, with a touch of tobacco. The acidity seems closer to that of the Cuvée Ruth and less noticeable than on the Seven Springs, though it might be hidden by the fruit, and there's a little less tension than on the Seven Springs. Richer and more rounded overall, with some oak

sweetness to round out the finish. Tannins seem thicker here than on the Seven Springs but not as chewy on the finish as the Cuvée Ruth, which seems – counterintuitively given the pricing – less approachable now than this wine but maybe this is just better integration with the fruit. It becomes more floral as it opens and the texture on the finish is more stony than grippy, a bit like the texture (not the flavour) of dark chocolate, leaving your mouth clean and dry. There's power here, a sweet/sour intensity in the fruit character but with a long savoury and dry finish. A complete wine. (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2022 – 2030

17

Walter Scott, Seven Springs Vineyard Pinot Noir 2018 Eola-Amity Hills

Seven Springs Vineyard is planted on a rocky volcanic Nekia clay bench on the coveted east slope of the Eola-Amity Hills. The vines get the gentle morning sun and are protected from the intense afternoon heat. This is sourced from Block B, a one-acre parcel consisting of a mix of 4 Dijon clones planted in traditional mass-selection fashion. Walter Scott is one of the few wineries given access to Seven Springs Vineyard, outside of Evening Land. 30% whole cluster. Aged in 228-litre French oak barrels for 15 months. 35% new oak.

Very similar in colour to the Cuvée Ruth, perhaps a little more translucent. There's still a delicate note of red fruits but also a darker-fruited aspect, more rocky, and it's peppery, more stone-dust/mineral with less immediate fruitiness on the nose, the restrained stemmy character adding the impression of freshness even before you taste the wine. On the palate, the acidity tastes higher than in the Sojeau Pinot and yet the whole is more supple with less oak spice and more fruit spice (assuming I can taste the difference?) and finer but perhaps deeper-rooted tannins, more sinew than muscle. Peppery, energetic non-sweet red fruits and impressive persistence. Elegant and fine-boned. Very good indeed and more complexity to come. Delicious. (JH)

13.5%

Drink 2022– 2030

17.5