

THE New Wine Review

Are These The Best White Wines in America?

Walter Scott's Chardonnays have yet to get all the attention they deserve. Don't expect that to last forever.

By [Jon Fine](#)

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It's a picturebook-perfect spring day in Oregon's Willamette Valley. And Erica Landon, who with her husband Ken Pahlow runs Walter Scott Wines, is inside her tiny winery, somewhat sheepishly regarding the riot of racks and barrels that their facility only barely contains.

"It feels like a hoarder's apartment of a winery," Landon admits. "Ken comes out here to do anything, and he has to move things for 45 minutes before he starts."



Walter Scott winemaker Ken Pahlow, navigating among the barrels in his very crowded winery.

You can be, as I am, a big Walter Scott fan from the East Coast, one half-bright to many business realities of winemaking, and assume—given its stalwart presence at smart wine shops, how quickly its new vintages disappear from those shelves, and how their prices have shot up (more on that later)—that you’re dealing with a reasonably big operation.

Then you arrive at Landon and Pahlow’s home base in Salem, Oregon, and it all comes clear: their winery is literally in their backyard, and it’s all of 3800 square feet. (Picture, perhaps, two two-car garages jammed next to each other.) And Pahlow and Landon have a grand total of one employee.

Not that they could physically fit anyone else into the building. “It’s, like, a three-thousand-case facility,” Landon says. “And we’re at six thousand cases.”

Their solution is to focus. In 2022, Pahlow says, those six thousand cases comprised 19 different bottlings of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Aligoté. Around 60 percent of that output was Chardonnay. By 2025,

says Pahlow, they’ll shrink production, so that Chardonnay’s percentage will shoot up to 80. Maybe even 85.

“We’re cutting back on Pinot Noir,” he says.

This is good news. Not because Walter Scott’s Pinots are mid or unmemorable. They’re not. They’re excellent! But for months I’ve been thinking of who, if anyone, consistently makes better Chardonnays in America than Walter Scott, and (with apologies to Ceritas, and Littorai, and Cameron, and a bunch of other greats) I keep drawing a blank. They are stony and mineral, and like many of the better reductively-made Meursaults of the moment, generous enough—but never close to being too generous. Lean and steely? Nope. Ripe and bounteous? Nope, not that either.

The word is finally out on Oregon Chardonnay, and we’ve been [banging this drum](#) here for a while. There are lots of great producers in the state to choose from. But despite all the strides Oregon Chardonnay has made, it’s just very hard to think of anyone making them better than Walter Scott.

All of this is kind of a mindfuck, honestly, because I’m old enough to remember when, broadly speaking, American Chardonnay sucked.

I’m sure Pahlow would word it differently, but the thing is that he can remember that, too.

He had been working with Oregon pioneer Mark Vlossak at St. Innocent since 1995, and also working with a small importer that brought in the likes of Remi Jobard, Bernard Moreau, and Paul Pernot. Landon was somm-ing in area restaurants. Pahlow started selling wine to Landon in 2002.

They became a couple, and in 2007 they “decided to empty out our meager retirement [funds] of \$20,000,” he says, to start Walter Scott. (It’s named for Pahlow’s grandfather and his nephew, in that order.) And, like many in Oregon, initially they were drawn to another grape.

“We were going to make Pinot Noir,” says Pahlow. One reason why: “You couldn’t get your hands on a well-farmed Chardonnay.”

At the time, he felt Oregon Chardonnay was notable primarily for using overcropped or overripe grapes. “I didn’t realize how good Willamette Valley Chardonnay could be, because so much of it was an afterthought,” he continues. “It was like, ‘OK, we picked our Chardonnay—put it in the barrels, and it makes itself.’” In its early years, Walter Scott experimented with Pinot Blanc. But in 2011, Landon and Pahlow found some older-vine Chardonnay they liked and produced 140 cases.



Pahlow at work

It snowballed from there, even though they still kept their day jobs. Landon ran wine programs for many top Portland restaurants, and also taught somm certification courses. Pahlow worked for noted Oregon winery Evening Land. He also had a job with a local importer based in Portland, though his heart was clearly elsewhere. “I wouldn’t say I was the burnt-out sales guy,” he remembers. “But there were certain wines that I just chose to never sell.” They both quit in 2014, the year their daughter was born, to focus full-time on Walter Scott.

It was a leap of faith financially speaking—to put it gently—but it did cut back on the craziness. “In 2012, we had a week’s vacation to bring in all of our grapes,” recalls Pahlow. Back when they both had other jobs, he continues, “we would get up at four in the morning, do a pump over, do a punch down, whatever, drive to Portland. [*A drive of more than an hour – Ed.*] Work all day. Drive home. Somewhere around nine o’clock, maybe have some dinner and a Negroni. And go to bed and do it all again.”

If there was a turning point, he says, it started in 2017. That year, Pahlow spent two weeks working harvest with Dominique Lafon—at both of Lafon’s Comtes Lafon and Dominique Lafon domaines—and came back convinced that drastically reducing yields was the key to producing better Chardonnay. Around then, Pahlow and Landon also took a moment to zero in on what their favorite Chardonnay vintages had in common. The common threads were warm growing seasons and—yup—low yields.

Pahlow began moving in that direction, and aggressively cutting shoots on his vines in order to get there. He’s a data-oriented and very enthused winemaker and he was kind enough to share a frankly head-spinning volume of detail on what he did and how he does it now. But the tl;dr is that he estimates Walter Scott’s yields are at least 30 percent lower today than other wineries’ buying from the same vineyards—and in certain vineyards that figure is more like 60 percent.



Aligoté in barrel.

With all truly great wineries, it's impossible to pinpoint the One Weird Trick that got them there. In Walter Scott's case, it's these low yields, picking earlier than many of the region's winemakers to preserve acidity, the intense minerality Landon and Pahlow reliably coax from their terroirs, and a reductive style of winemaking that ramps up their wines' characteristic tension and drive and accentuates the mid-palate fruit. But there's also the X factor that every great winery can claim, which is where any such analysis breaks down entirely, and the details that frankly surprise. The winery uses more new wood on certain bottlings than I'd have guessed—over 50 percent, in some instances, albeit in larger barrels.

It all adds up to wines that have sharply defined frameworks, ample acidity, and freshness and energy, while packing in a remarkable richness and intensity for wines that, in 2022, clocked in between all of 12.8 and 13.1 percent ABVs. (That ABV level is “very similar” for the older wines discussed in the

tasting notes below, says Landon.)

And, as with the world's great wines, these are not cheap. Walter Scott's single-vineyard Chardonnays now start around \$80, and its top cuvées—X Novo (a particularly fascinating wine; see my tasting notes below) and Lucille—top \$100. “To go from \$65 to \$80 [for such wines] was a jump,” Pahlow concedes. “But we'd lost a vintage,” meaning the smoke-tainted 2020 vintage, when Walter Scott bottled none of its single-vineyard cuvées. (That decision, he reckons, cost the winery several hundred thousand dollars.) “We'd had four consecutive low-yielding vintages,” Pahlow continues, “and every week for a year and a half, all we got from suppliers were notices saying prices were going up.”

“And you know,” he adds, “the Willamette Valley deserves—I mean, Arnaud Ente's Bourgogne Blanc is \$185.”

Even after that price hike, though, the wines still disappear from retailers' shelves (and the winery's [website](#)) remarkably quickly.

And if all this keeps up, who knows? Landon and Pahlow may even be able to hire a second employee.

WALTER SCOTT CHARDONNAYS

2022 Walter Scott Cuvée Anne Chardonnay

An excellent Walter Scott primer: apples, excellent acidity, and a serious mineral crunch that defines the finish. Forty-five percent new oak, but you'd never guess. (Pahlow contends that reductive winemaking and keeping wine's pH low means that "the wood becomes part of the wine, instead of the centerpiece.") A blend of fruit from four vineyards: Justice, Koosah, Sojeau, and Witness Tree. As with its outstanding entry-level La Combe Verte Chardonnay, this one is for earlier drinking than the ones that follow.

2022 Walter Scott Freedom Hill Vineyard Chardonnay

Paler and greener-tinged than the 2021 (the notes for that one are below). Sweeter on the nose at this stage, too, but this really zings, like a pleasingly sweet and purely refreshing Meyer lemon. A very particular minerality shaping this one, or rather an almost particulate one—like you could count the individual shards, because its presentation is so fine and precise. Serious energy and drive; with stunning balance and tension between fruit, acid, structure, and oak. Fun stuff for sure at the moment, but don't drink this now: this one's going places.

2022 Walter Scott Hyland Vineyard Chardonnay

Tart apples up top, but a fleshier mid-palate awaits, framed by a citrusy vibe that leads to a satisfying and lasting finish. Super stony, characterized by big rocks rather than the finer particulates of some other cuvées, and—this phrase comes up a lot with Walter Scott—excellent acidity. Thirty-five percent new oak, which at this stage is unusually apparent on the nose. Needs time to fully integrate, but the ingredients are more than present.

2022 Walter Scott X Novo Vineyard Chardonnay

A very singular vineyard that was planted in 2011 with around 20 different clones. The wine reflects that; expect a shape-shifting and even slightly psychedelic vibe. Orchard fruits and starfruit—even hints of tropical fruit—move in and out of frame. Definitely needs time to come together, but even in its youth, it spreads over the palate seductively. Really fascinating stuff from a fascinating vineyard, and quite distinct from the rest of Walter Scott's other excellent Chardonnays. These vines are still young, but the vineyard clearly has its own personality; tracking the evolution of this wine, and this vineyard, will be very rewarding.

2022 Walter Scott Lucille Chardonnay

Complex, but to oversimplify: fresh-cut apples, with a crushed rock finish and a serious peacock's tail—even at this early stage, this one really fans out across the palate. Excellent length and persistence, and, as is typical with Walter Scott's wines, wrapped up in a very smart structure and framework. Very interesting at this stage, but wait several years to drink. From a favorite plot in the Freedom Hill vineyard, from vines planted in 1995. Named for Landon's and Pahlow's daughter.

2021 Walter Scott Freedom Hill Vineyard Chardonnay

A richer gold than the 2022. Hint of oak on the nose at first, followed by lemon curd and flint. The palate is saline, refreshing, with ripe apples and fresh-cut lemon. The framing is classic Walter

Scott, with a finish that tingles with energy and acidity. A smoother vibe than the '22—there is more density, now that it's had an extra year to come together, and its rocks are bigger stones, not finely ground shards. Peacock tail in effect. This gets better over the course of an evening.

2021 Walter Scott Justice Vineyard Chardonnay

Ripe, round (as opposed to tart), baked apple nose. Mouthfilling palate—apples again, lemon curd and citrusy hints, and lots of Walter Scott fine minerality on top. Finish has amazing sustain, if I can talk about this wine like it's a guitar or a power chord. Greener apples kick in at the end; there's wood here, but it's very well-integrated. Upgrade your pal who's a fan of ripe-leaning Cali Chardonnays to this—they'll get a taste of that vibe in a far smarter and subtler way.

2019 Walter Scott Freedom Hill Vineyard Chardonnay

Juicy, fresh-apple nose. Ripe—but not overripe—apple and orchard fruit flavors at the forefront. Lip-smacking acidity, great liveliness and drive, and a textbook long minerally finish. Delicious, and still evolving. This is the wine that made a Walter Scott believer out of me. I'd be able to comment more on its ongoing development if I hadn't drunk so many of my bottles already.