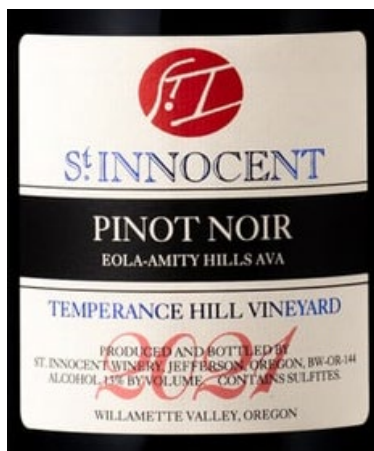


St. Innocent Willamette Valley



Mark Vlossak at St. Innocent Winery is another of the old-timers still making great wines in the Willamette Valley. Mark trained in medicine and moved from his native Wisconsin to Oregon back in 1983, to begin his career as a pediatrician. But his arrival here reignited a love of wine he had learned at the side of his father, who was a wine collector in his day, and Mark soon found the siren call of the grape irresistible. So he changed career course, setting aside his new medical practice to study winemaking at UC-Davis and then interning at Arteberry Winery after graduation. He launched St. Innocent all the way back in 1988 and has never looked back. From 1994 to 1999, Mark was the full-time winemaker at Panther Creek, while he was in the process of getting the business foundation built at St. Innocent that would allow him to run his own winery full-time. I have never had any of Mark's earliest vintages, but he cites his starting to visit Burgundy in the late 1990s as the seminal moment when he found his own stylistic direction for his wines at St. Innocent and has been making soil-driven, elegant and classically-proportioned pinot noirs and chardonnays ever since that day. In 2017 he cleared and planted his first vineyard of his own, as he had previously been content to work with purchased grapes from some of Oregon's finest pinot noir vineyards. Today, he produces four single vineyard bottlings of pinot noir (as the vines are still too young at his own, organically-farmed estate vineyard): Freedom Hill Vineyard, Momtazi Vineyard, Shea Vineyard and Temperance Hill Vineyard. His wines see a maximum of thirty percent new oak, are generally fermented with native yeasts (Mark likes to have a small bit of neutral German yeasts working in a tank nearby, but will only use this if a fermentation becomes "stuck"), with the wines never fined, but very lightly filtered and bottled by gravity. I do not have as much experience with Mark's pinot noirs as some of the other producers in my list here, as I have only tasted his 2016s and now his superb 2021s (see below), but based on what I have tasted, there is no doubt that St. Innocent belongs on my list of Oregon's finest pinot noir producers and I have been remiss in the past in not tasting his excellent wines each and every year.

-John Gilman, View from the Cellar, November-December 2024

Temperance Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021

The 2021 Pinot Noir “Temperance Hill Vineyard” bottling from St. Innocent is a lovely bottle as well, coming in at bit more tightly-knit, as this cooler microclimate produced a pinot noir at thirteen percent octane in this classic vintage. Temperance Hill is a higher altitude and cooler vineyard, farmed organically and Mark’s parcels sit on a mix of volcanic soils and were planted in 1984. The wine is raised similarly to all of Mark’s pinot noirs, with native yeast fermentation, destemmed berries and only sixteen percent new oak used in this vintage. The bouquet is bright and youthfully reticent, offering up scents of dark berries, black cherries, bonfire, a touch of mustard seed, lovely volcanic soils, coffee bean and just a whisper of new wood. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with lovely depth of fruit at the core, excellent soil signature, fine-grained tannins and a long, beautifully balanced and energetic finish. This wine seems likely to take even a year or two longer to open than the more structured Freedom Hill, as the cooler fruit tones here have given the wine a lovely girdle of youthful austerity that will have to be waited out. However, over the long haul, this is likely to be as fine a bottling of pinot noir as any in Mark’s outstanding roster of 2021s! 2034-2075.

93 pts-John Gilman, View from the Cellar, November-December 2024

Freedom Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021

The 2021 Freedom Hill Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Mark Vlossak comes in at fourteen percent octane. It was fermented with native yeasts and raised in twenty-two percent new oak in this vintage. The wine delivers a beautiful, black fruity aromatic constellation of black cherries, sweet dark berries, raw cocoa, gamebird, dark soil tones, woodsmoke, just a touch of new oak and a topnote of violets. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a gorgeous core of fruit, excellent soil inflection and grip, ripe, buried tannins and excellent balance on the long and very promising finish. This fine bottle needs appropriate hibernation time in the cellar to soften up its backend tannins, but it has lovely sappiness at the core and excellent soil transparency and once those tannins have softened, it is going to be an outstanding bottle! 2033-2075.

93 pts-John Gilman, View from the Cellar, November-December 2024

Momtazi Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021

I have been a fan of the biodynamically-farmed Momtazi Vineyard since I tasted my first wine from the estate, which happened to be made by Kelley Fox, who had her cellars next door to the vineyard back at that time. The 2021 St. Innocent version is excellent, coming in at fourteen percent alcohol, having been completely destemmed, fermented with indigenous yeasts and raised in twenty percent new casks for sixteen months prior to bottling. The wine's bouquet is deep and precise, wafting from the glass in a mix of black cherries, pomegranate, fresh thyme, distant bonfire, coffee bean, gentle notes of cedary oak and a superbly complex foundation of soil tones. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, elegant and soil-driven in personality, with a lovely core of fruit, tangy acids, fine-grained tannins, superb focus and grip and a long, seamlessly balanced and impressively complex finish. This does not have the weight or inner core of the Freedom Hill bottling, but it is more complex and I love its dancing backend energy! 2032-2075.

93+ pts-John Gilman, View from the Cellar, November-December 2024

Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir 2021

The 2021 Shea Vineyard bottling of pinot noir from Mark Vlossak is another outstanding bottle in the making. It is a touch lower in octane than the Freedom Hill or Momtazi cuvées this year, tipping the scales at 13.5 percent alcohol. The wine was raised in twenty-two percent new barrels, fermented with native yeasts and bunches were destemmed. The wine shows a beautiful sense of sappiness and precision on the nose, which features more red fruity tones than either the Momtazi or Freedom Hill in this vintage, delivering scents of red and black cherries, red plums, raw cocoa, pigeon, fresh thyme, woodsmoke, a beautifully complex base of soil, peonies and just a touch of new oak. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, soil-driven and sappy at the core, with tangy acids, great focus and grip, superb mineral drive and a long, fine-grained and beautifully balanced, complex finish. This is a great bottle in the making. 2032-2075+.

94 pts-John Gilman, View from the Cellar, November-December 2024