

Oregon, Willamette Valley:

Walter Scott's Freedom Hill Vineyard Chardonnay, 2014–2021

-Erin Brooks, Robert Parker, Wine Advocate, Feb 29, 2024



The Willamette Valley has become synonymous with Pinot Noir—an impressive feat for this young wine region—yet despite its popularity among wine professionals in the US and abroad, its Chardonnay still struggles to gain recognition on the world stage. For those of us who can't afford or even find great bottles of Burgundy, Willamette Valley Chardonnay is a dream come true, offering the sunny flesh of US fruit and the focused, laser-like acidity more often associated with European wines, and for a fraction of the price. One Oregon winemaker said succinctly, “Burgundy is what you post on Instagram. Oregon is what you drink.”

Founded in 2008 by Ken Pahlow and Erica Landon, Walter Scott Wines produced its first Pinot Noir in 2009 and its first Chardonnay in 2011. In a short space of time, the winery has gained a cult following among in-the-know consumers for top-quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. It's grown from just 625 cases in 2009 to around 6,500 cases today, with fruit sourced from several vineyards in the Willamette Valley, mostly in the Eola-Amity Hills appellation. They produce blended and single-vineyard bottlings of both colors and are most well known for their reductive style.

The Chardonnays in particular are lauded for their unapologetic flintiness, a style associated with domaines such as Coche-Dury and Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey. Their matchstick-like character can be polarizing, especially if it comes at the expense of fruit, yet it's a main driver of its cult status. Over the years, I've tasted a few problematic bottles—the 2021 Chardonnay from Freedom Hill Vineyard was too reductive at first to rate—but overall, the wines have proven successful in showcasing site, and there's now enough history for a vertical to illuminate how well these wines will develop in the cellar. "As a domestic producer, I can't say, 'Screw you; age it 10 years,'" Pahlow explains, when I ask for his thoughts on producing overtly reductive wines. "It can't go over the top. I want it to integrate with other aromatics. Does it amplify what the place is trying to say or does it take away from it?"



Freedom Hill Vineyard is located just outside the boundaries of the wider Willamette Valley but within the newly created Mount Pisgah, Polk County appellation. Originally planted in 1982, its own-rooted Pinot Noir vines succumbed to phylloxera and were replanted on rootstock in the 1990s. Today, around 93 acres are planted, including just 14 acres of Chardonnay. 2014 marked the first single-vineyard bottling of Freedom Hill Chardonnay by Walter Scott, and it came from a small, 0.83-acre parcel of California sprawl vines. Today, Pahlow and Landon purchase fruit from around six acres of Chardonnay in the vineyard, including 1.83 acres of California sprawl vines planted in 1995 and 4.22 acres of VSP-trained vines planted in 2009. "This vineyard, more than any other, represents where we've been and where we've come from," Pahlow says.

In 2017, Pahlow traveled to Burgundy to work the harvest and discovered some producers who crushed their white grapes before pressing rather than simply pressing whole clusters, resulting in more solids and thus a more reductive style of white wine. "I felt it gave more depth and weight and oomph to the wine," he recalls. That same year, a warm, dry, early season in the Willamette Valley resulted in a massive

crop, and Pahlow and Landon had to begin some fermentations in stainless steel tanks. “Starting in tank provided uniform ferments and a real learning lesson,” Pahlow continues, noting that from then on, all the Chardonnay fermentations were started in tank and spent 6–10 days there before going to barrel to complete fermentation. The warmth and ripeness of 2017 caused Pahlow to worry about how he might retain acidity in seasons like this moving forward. “The wine was good, but ... I wanted more,” he says of the 2017s. “I tasted stress. As we are getting warmer, I want the plants to have less burden on them so they can be stronger in the season and not start to sag in June and July.”

The small Chardonnay parcels in Freedom Hill, planted with both old California sprawl and young Vertical Shoot Position (VSP)-trained vines, offered insight. “The old vines will hold their acid, and their pHs will be lower,” he notes. “But those vines had been hanging five tons per acre since 2000. There were 17 extra years of burden on those plants.” The younger vines were even more stressed. In 2018, Pahlow lowered the crop level dramatically, but with less tonnage, it wasn’t enough to cover farming costs. He offered to pay more, “and that’s what started the whole change in farming philosophy and working with growers to get lower yields,” he says. Now, he pays by the acre in order to achieve his desired yields. “My vines are less stressed,” he continues. “2014 through 2018 were dry, dry, dry. If you overburden a vine, it will get stressed. It’s no different than a person.” After seeing wine quality increase, “I am absolutely convinced that yield is everything, but you have to set it early,” he maintains.

As Pahlow and Landon dial in their vineyard sources, farming practices and winemaking techniques, their wines continue to offer higher quality. Chardonnay now accounts for about 60% of production, with the remainder dedicated to Pinot Noir. They use Chassin, François Frères and Damy oak barrels and stick mostly to the 350-liter format, which complements the reductive style of the wines. In 2019, they discontinued foils and switched from traditional Diam corks to Origine by Diam, which uses beeswax and vegetable compounds as a binder rather than microplastics. Their choice of Diam 10 over the more anaerobic Diam 30 has paid off, complementing rather than exaggerating the reductive character of the wines.