

Valley wine women at Portland City Club

Columnists | Thu, 01/14/2010 - 7:54 am | Read 90 | Commented 0 | Emailed 0
By Karl Klooster

One couldn't find three people, regardless of gender, who would be better qualified to speak on behalf of the Oregon wine industry than Pat Dudley of Bethel Heights Vineyard, Lynn Penner Ash of Penner-Ash Wine Cellars and Susan Sokol Blosser of Sokol Blosser Winery.

When the City Club of Portland reached out for industry representatives who could offer insight into this dynamic Oregon enterprise, the trio agreed to team up for an insider perspective.

A venerable institution dating back to 1916, the City Club has a long history of hosting Friday Forums featuring prominent personages, from both the public and private sectors.

The roster includes business people, professionals and politicians. University presidents, attorneys and government administrators are often invited to inform the membership about matters within their areas of expertise.

On Dec. 18, members and guests gathered at the Governor Hotel in downtown Portland for the club's final forum of the year. In the spirit of the season, it was titled, "Wine Down for the Holidays."

With only 45 minutes to divide among the three of them, they decided to focus on what they know best — Oregon's leading wine, pinot noir, from its leading winegrowing region, Northwestern Oregon.

Sokol Blosser, who co-founded the family's eponymous winery in 1971 with her husband, Bill, went first. As the acknowledged first woman of Oregon wine, she covered the subject of its history as someone who had lived it.

"When Bill said he wanted to come to Oregon and start a winery, at first I thought he was nuts," she said. "There was no industry here and we had no experience.

"But after we arrived, we quickly bonded with the handful of other couples who had the same crazy notion. It may not have been expressed in so many words at the time, but we were pioneers. We were writing the book for future generations."

Operating, as Sokol Blosser put it, "under the radar," they tried all sorts of experiments both in the vineyard and the winery. They shared ideas freely and kept at it until they got it right.

"Now that we're more in the public eye, the industry has been changing," she said. "Still, in the context of the larger wine world, it's a small local industry made up primarily of small wineries. We still work closely together."

Next up was Penner Ash, who graduated from UC Davis with a degree in fermentation science, then went to work for Rex Hill Winery in 1988. She spent 14 years making wine there, eventually becoming company president.

After playing a major role in building Rex Hill into one of Oregon's largest and most respected pinot noir producers, she left in 2002 to co-found, with her husband, Ron, the winery bearing their name.

Elaborating on the common theme of closeness and cooperation, Penner Ash emphasized the industry's collaborative nature, which continues to this day.

"We're the underdogs," she said. "We know we have to work together to be successful. Proceeding from the premise that a rising tide floats all boats, our first marketing goal is to build Brand Oregon."

She mentioned activities and events that have contributed to the common good:

The annual Steamboat Inn retreat outside of Roseburg, which has brought winemakers together since 1979 for a weekend of open discussion centered around food and wine. LIVE, Oregon's widely

heralded sustainability program. The Oregon Pinot Camp, where customers are invited to experience an intensely up-close and personal look at the industry. ¡Salud!, a one-of-a-kind health care program for vineyard workers and their families. And the International Pinot Noir Celebration, a world-class event born in McMinnville, which has uniquely identified Oregon with the noble Burgundian grape.

“Pinot noir accounts for 60 percent of the vineyard plantings in Oregon,” Penner Ash said. But she was only providing a ballpark figure in her talk.

In fact, it’s 64 percent. Underscoring the point, it’s 66 in the Northern Willamette Valley and 76.7 in Yamhill County.

She went on to enumerate the reasons why pinot noir does so well here. Besides being bisected by the 45th parallel, like Burgundy, she made a particular point to emphasize the “Oregonness” of our pinots.

“Like Burgundy, Northwestern Oregon has a cool climate, and it actually rains twice as much here,” Penner Ash said. “But they get rain all year long, whereas we don’t get it during the growing season. It falls when the vines are dormant.”

She mentioned the similarity in seasonal heat units, and the cool summer nights that allow the vines to rest after warm days. Geography and climate having been covered, she focused on the third essential element that defines place of origin for wine — soil.

“We have a dynamic geology that has brought about soil diversity,” she said. “Volcanic erosion, marine sediments and loess. Fire, water and wind. Each of them contributes to the unique sense of place we can identify in pinot noirs from various AVAs.”

In other words, Northwestern Oregon wines share the common qualities of full ripening and bright acidity without reaching high sugar levels. That fosters complexity, along with distinctive aroma and flavor characteristics owing to soil and micro-climate differences.

Bringing up the third spot was Dudley, president and marketing director at Bethel Heights Vineyard. She co-founded the winery in 1977 with her husband, Ted Casteel; his twin brother, Terry Casteel; and Terry’s wife, Marilyn Webb.

Dudley, who was tasked with covering the topic of economic impact, told club members that the Oregon wine industry’s 19,300 vineyard acres, as of 2008, represent only a tiny slice of the 16 million acres devoted to agriculture. But when you put the grapes in a bottle, offer them for sale on retail shelves and serve them in restaurants across the country, she said, the revenue gap quickly begins to close.

“Back in the beginning, we valued our best estate grapes at \$700 a ton,” she noted. “Now it’s about \$5,000.”

Dudley went on to describe the Oregon Wine Board study commissioned in 2006, producing a 50-page report documenting a very impressive conclusion.

“Taking into account all directly and indirectly related economic considerations, everything we touch — tourism, lodging, dining, gasoline, retail purchases — the whole nine yards, it came out to \$1.42 billion,” she said, emphasizing the “B.”

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