Pioneering Winemaking in Oregon

12 top wines from Brooks
March 28, 2011 By Gregory Dal Piaz

Brooks Wines, and in particular its late founder, Jimi Brooks, have together had a profound impact on the Oregon wine scene. He was a native Oregonian who spent time in Beaujolais making wine only to return to the Willamette Valley. Beginning in 1996, Jimi worked at WillaKenzie Estate before moving on to Maysara, where he wore the dual caps of winemaker and vineyard manager.

In many ways, what we see as two caps and two titles were merely two facets of the single job that Jimi had come to learn in Beaujolais: making wine in the vineyards. While still at WillaKenzie, Jimi was able to begin making his own wine under the Brooks label: Riesling and Pinot Noir, the two varieties that Brooks continues to excel with, though its Pinot Blanc could make a huge contribution to my summer lifestyle!

Jimi Brooks touched many people in the Willamette Valley with his holistic approach to winemaking, beginning with biodynamic vineyards well before anyone was talking about bio-what? That ideal, that attachment to the land and revealing what it gives each vintage, continues to embody the spirit of Brooks, currently run by Managing Director Janie Brooks Heuck (Jimi’s sister) with the help of winemaker Chris Williams.

I recently had the chance to sit with Janie for a while and taste through Brooks’ current line-up, even getting a sneak peak at some barrel samples. I could write more about the story of the winery, but Janie recounts it so much better than I could, capturing the simply remarkable cooperative effort that not only ensured its survival in the days after Jimi’s passing, but also the degree to which Jimi had affected people in the Valley and how willing they were to ensure his legacy in turn. Check out the brief video to learn more about Brooks, Janie and what’s going on today.

Click to see the video interview with Brooks Wines’ Janie Brooks Heuck

This legacy, though, is not only the legacy of Jimi Brooks, it’s also the legacy of what came before Jimi. Brooks Winery and its surrounding vineyards are actually some of Oregon’s oldest and certainly one of the very first in the Eola Hills. Before being turned into Hidden Springs Winery, this land, like much of the surrounding land, had been used primarily to farm prunes.

The Byards, Hidden Springs’ original owners, were pioneers, but perhaps a bit before their time — or at least, the time for wine in Oregon. By 1993, they had had enough of the winery life and moved on, eventually selling the winery, which was used by Hatcher and Francis Tannahill Wineries before becoming home to Brooks Wines in 2008.

Today, Brooks continues to be a pioneer of sorts, thankfully persisting with Riesling while Oregon went...
whole hog for Pinot Grigio, introducing new wines whether they be Runaway Reds or Whites (named after an escaped barrel) and continuing to make wine in their vineyards -- yes, biodynamically farmed vineyards. In addition to the biodynamically farmed vineyards, that include their home vineyard as well as the Montazi Vineyard that Brooks purchases fruit from, the winery sources all fruit from vineyards that are sustainably farmed. The wines that are produced exclusively from biodynamically farmed fruit are: Rastaban, Tethys and Sweet P. The other wines in the lineup all include lots from Brooks’ vineyards, as well as other growers.

These are all wines that are well worth searching for. Chris Williams has consistently crafted elegant, expressive wines that reveal as much about Oregon as they do about Chris Williams, Janie Brooks Heuck and Jimi Brooks. Even the White House thinks so! Brooks 2006 Riesling was served at President Obama’s first state dinner. If it’s good enough for heads of states, it might even be good enough for you!

Click to see slideshow of 12 Top Wines from Brooks

Tags: slideshow, winemaker, Oregon, Winery Visit, Wine Reviews, Gregory Dal Piaz

COMMENTS

Gregory,

I’m pretty sure that Brook’s doesn’t produce 12 Biodynamic wines. They purchase fruit from non-biodynamic vineyard sites too. It would be more “clear” and beneficial to Brooks, if you would actually site the wines that are grown and made using 100% Biodynamic methods and fruit. There is enough confusion about what Biodynamics is, this lack of fact finding in your article is another example.

MAR 28, 2011 AT 2:56 PM

The article has been updated to answer your question and clarify this issue. Thanks for taking the time to make your point. It is appreciated.

MAR 28, 2011 AT 4:22 PM