

The Oregonian

What a difference a glass makes -- honest

Tuesday, August 21, 2007

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I'll bet you rolled your eyes when you saw the accompanying photo of the new Oregon Pinot Noir Glass from famed crystal producer Riedel.

"Oh, please," you're thinking. "What difference could there possibly be between an Oregon pinot noir glass and a typical Burgundy glass, or a basic red-wine glass, for that matter?"

You're in good company: Most casual wine drinkers couldn't care less about specially shaped chalices.

I've tried enough of these costly cups to know they can be extremely effective in maximizing one's perception and enjoyment of wine, but I don't go out of my way to recommend them because I hate to encourage the notion wine is something that requires great expense and ceremony.

So when I had the opportunity recently to interview Georg Riedel, president of the company, I was prepared to be skeptical about the Oregon Pinot Noir Glass.

To my surprise, Riedel -- rhymes with "needle" -- was refreshingly negative about his newest creation. "I didn't want to do the project to begin with," the crystal kingpin grumbled. His company, he explained, has always designed glasses for specific grape varieties and wine styles -- never for particular regions. "I call it 'the troublemaker,'" the Austrian executive continued, "because everybody will point to this glass and say, 'Why won't you do it for me?'"

Riedel staunchly refused the suggestion he might roll out glasses specific to California cabernet or Washington syrah in the future. The Oregon-only goblet, he said, is a one-time deal. (Credit for this coup goes to Amy Wesselman, executive director of the International Pinot Noir Celebration, who twisted Riedel's arm, persuading him to design a special glass to unveil at the recent 20th anniversary of the IPNC, where Riedel was the keynote speaker.)

Experts sniff out

a prototype with flare To determine what the design should be, a panel of winemakers, sommeliers and critics tasted Oregon pinot noirs in 16 existing Riedel glasses, then narrowed the field down to their three favorites: the Sommeliers Burgundy Grand Cru, the Vinum Extreme Pinot Noir and the Vinum Burgundy (all, to the relief of Georg Riedel, were glasses designed specifically for tasting pinot noir).

Next, glassblowers in Kufstein, Austria, created prototypes that combined features of the trio in a way that would best exhibit Oregon pinot noir. Their final design has a flared top like that of the Sommeliers Burgundy Grand Cru and a bowl with the fat, rounded base of the Vinum Burgundy and a length like that of the Vinum Extreme.

I'd been given the glass -- not crystal -- version of this vessel to use in a taste test. As this is the type restaurants and tasting rooms use, I decided to pit it against my own restaurant-grade Vinum Extreme, as well as my basic bulbous restaurant-grade Burgundy glass.

(Note: Experts say crystal conveys the aromas and flavors of wine better than glass does; this means that, in fairness, I can't test this glass against Riedel's handblown crystal Sommeliers Grand Cru glass, which sells for upward of \$75 per stem.)

Into each goblet went some fancy Oregon pinot (2004 Anne Amie "La Colina" Dundee Hills Pinot Noir; \$50), and I set to work sniffing and sipping.

What a difference

design can make

OK, I'll admit it: I liked the Oregon Pinot Noir Glass the best. In my standard Burgundy glass, the wine's color looked muddy, the aromas dissipated quickly and the palate was flat, with excessive alcoholic heat to the finish. My Vinum Extreme concentrated, accentuated and brightened the aroma and palate to, well, the extreme: The wine came across as pungent, with jammy fruit.

By contrast, the Oregon Pinot Noir Glass gently delivered sultry aromas. Instead of ripe cherries, I got dried cherries. And instead of sandalwood, I picked up forest-floor notes such as truffles. The palate was smooth and velvety; the fruit popped at the finish but didn't overwhelm at the start. The acidity was still pleasantly noticeable and the alcohol was less flagrant. And, on top of it all, the presentation was very pretty.

Is this glass shape better than the others for sipping Oregon pinot noir? If you enjoy balanced, smooth and elegant wines, yes, as far as I can tell. If you're a fan of larger-than-life "fruit bombs," invest in a set of Vinum Extremes.

The crystal "Vinum Series" Oregon Pinot Noir Glass, which will sell for approximately \$30 per stem, should be available in local wine shops and cookware stores in late autumn or winter.

You can purchase the \$15 glass -- not crystal, mind you -- goblet that I tested, stamped with a local winery's logo, at many Willamette Valley tasting rooms.

Or, save yourself the expense and try out the vessel at local restaurants and wine bars such as Gino's, The London Grill, Nostrana, Oregon Wines on Broadway and Terroir, to name a few.

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