

Oregon Historical Society toasts wine industry with Clink!: Wine Notes

Andie Petkus Photography



Clink! at the Oregon Historical Society. (Andie Petkus Photography)

We all have crazy, brilliant ideas from time to time. Few of us have the guts to act on those ideas.

Peter Britt, however, did. As a young Swiss immigrant to the United States, he headed west to Oregon Territory in a wagon loaded down—improbably—with camera equipment. Britt established a homestead in Jacksonville, opened a gallery, pursued his love of art and photography, tried out gold mining and planted a vineyard. Today, Britt's former homestead hosts a [popular music festival](#). And his [Valley View](#) wine label, revived in 1972, lives on.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a group of young idealists demonstrated similar chutzpah. Throwing caution to the wind, they settled in Oregon's rain-soaked Willamette Valley, dreaming of one day producing great pinot noir.

In 1973, with the establishment of the [Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development](#), two of these audacious winemakers led the charge to set aside the prime vineyard zones of the northern Willamette Valley, thus saving these scenic hillsides for agricultural purposes. This single elegant move planted the seeds for a booming wine industry that creates jobs and brings tourism and tax dollars into this state. Thank you, David Adelsheim of [Adelsheim](#) and David Lett of [The Eyrie Vineyards](#).

Oregon wine country is full of heroes like these two. For example: the 18 Oregon producers who, in 1991, created [iSalud!](#), a charity that funds comprehensive health care for migrant vineyard workers. Back then, there was no other program like it.

And how about Moe and Flora Momtazi? In 1982, they fled the oppressive regime of Iran on the backs of a couple of drug runners' motorcycles when Flora was eight months pregnant. Their eldest daughter, Tahmiene, was born in Spain shortly after that harrowing escape. The Momtazis went on to settle in Oregon. Eventually, they developed the largest biodynamic vineyard in the state and established [Maysara](#) winery. Tahmiene grew up to be, for a time, the youngest female winemaker working in the United States.

As the great generation of "pinot pioneers" begin to retire (Lett died in 2008), it's time to take stock of all that they have achieved and just how far the industry has come over the past five decades. Archivist Rachael Woody has been doing just that since 2011, with the establishment of the [Oregon Wine History Archive at Linfield College](#) in McMinnville.

And now, at the Oregon Historical Society, you can see highlights from that archive as well other as fascinating relics from Oregon's winemaking beginnings. For example: a bottle of Peter Britt's wine dating back to 1898 and an ebullimeter (a tool used to determine alcohol content) from the 1880s, on loan from [Hillcrest Vineyard](#), Oregon's first modern winery.

The wine bar at Clink!, at the Oregon Historical Society.

They are part of a special exhibition, called [Clink!](#), up through Sept. 20. The show, curated by Lori Erickson, relays the history of the Oregon wine industry in an appealing format, featuring crisp, bold graphics by Bryan Potter Design and interactive elements such as a scent wall and — yes! — a tasting room.

Best of all, the exhibition highlights those winemakers who bravely leapt into uncharted waters, and in doing so, shaped our state's history.

Note: I'll be moderating a discussion about risk-taking entrepreneurship in the wine industry on Wednesday, June 18, beginning at 7 p.m. at the Oregon Historical Society. Winery owners Jim Bernau, Dr. Robert Gross and Anne Hubatch will speak about their careers in wine.

