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## California-made Oregon pinots: Are they real?

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Napa Valley winemaker Joe Wagner says he makes his top-selling Oregon pinot noir, called Elouan, in a style that reflects the grapes he sources from Oregon growers, his own palate preference and the tastes of consumers.

But how he and other California winemakers arrive at a dark, opulent version of Oregon pinot is a key subplot in the ongoing drama involving Wagner and the Oregon wine industry.

Jim Bernau, the Willamette Valley Vineyards founder, has his doubts. He is among those who want to give Oregon regulators greater ability to police California wineries that produce Oregon wines to ensure they're following the same rules Oregon wineries are required to. He points to the often lower-priced California-made pinots that are gaining market share.

"The way many of them make a profit at making Willamette Valley or Oregon-appellated pinot noir is to adulterate it," Bernau said. "You use concentrates. That's how you do it."

Concentrates are legal in California-designated wines, and there's no question they are employed in the Golden State's gigantic wine industry, though no winery talks about the subject publicly. But because commercially available concentrates are made from California grapes — "Mega Purple" is a brand often talked about — they can't legally be used in Oregon-designated wines, which must contain 100 percent Oregon grapes.

Bernau stops short of outright accusing Wagner, specifically, of using concentrates, and Wagner flatly denies using them — in his Oregon wines or any of his wines. He says his wines are the result of smart, legitimate and creative work in the vineyard and the winery.



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By law, Oregon-designated wines must be made from 100 percent Oregon grapes.

“We like higher levels of maturity,” Wagner said. “It doesn’t necessarily mean higher levels of sugar, but we like more hang time for flavor development. And our extraction methods are quite different. We use methods that allow us to penetrate deeper into the skins to extract more color, more opulence, and the flavor and aromatics follow suit.”

An article in the pinot-focused publication PinotFile about Copper Cane wines talked about Wagner’s use of a perfectly legal technique called “cryo-maceration,” in which the grapes are frozen shortly after harvest. This “breaks down the grape skin’s cellular membranes, allowing the winemaker to draw out ... compounds more gently” than through standard techniques. “The result is softer, rounder wines with deeper color,” the article goes on.

But one prominent wine figure in Oregon thinks she can taste the Mega Purple (or some product like it) in Wagner’s wine.

Eugenia Keegan is general manager in Oregon for Jackson Family Wines, a California-based winery that, unlike Wagner, owns vineyards and winemaking facilities in Oregon.

“Without a doubt,” Keegan said when asked if she thinks Elouan contains concentrates. “Once you’ve learned the taste, you can pick it out instantly. It’s like those fake sugars, Splenda or whatever; you know when it’s not the real thing.”

But here’s a question: What about Oregon winemakers? Are their methods so pure?

“I would say that in the Willamette Valley, basically 99 percent of wines are made without any tricks,” Keegan said. “It’s just grapes into wine. And you know, I’m not saying that’s the way everyone in the world has to make wine. I’m not trying to be a purist. But that’s what this region’s wines are, and that’s not always easy, but that’s an important aspect of our identity.”

But Joel Myers, a longtime Willamette Valley vineyard manager who has his own family vineyard and small winery, thinks Oregonians should be careful about throwing stones at Californians.

“There are wineries in Oregon that use fruit additives in their wines,” said Myers, a vocal opponent of the wine-regulation legislation that Bernau and the Oregon Winegrowers Association back. “And if it’s not Mega Purple, what about concentrators?”

There’s no question that Oregon wineries do use concentrators, vacuum evaporators that remove water from the must, the crushed grapes that are fermented into wine. Because they’re working with Oregon grapes, there’s nothing illegal about it.

“Everyone should follow the rules,” Myers said, “but if you ask me, there’s not a big difference between using a concentrator and Mega Purple.”

**Pete Danko**  
Staff Reporter  
*Portland Business Journal*

