

One on One with Winemaker: Steve Lutz of Lenné Estate

By Anatoli Levine, [Talk-A-Vino](#)

For many years, I was trying to start my garden. Every year I would order my tomato plants, some peppers, and some herbs, plant them and then meticulously make sure to water them on the regular basis and hope for the best. Every year my reward would be a nice rosemary and sage (basil would always die) and maybe 10 mediocre tomatoes from 8 or so plants.

This was the story until this year, when I built raised beds, got a perfect top soil, premixed with all the proper organic fertilizers, planted tomatoes and lots more, and still collect (it is October now) a nice daily harvest of tomatoes, eggplants, and cucumbers. The soil is the king, you know – that rich, soft, almost greasy dark goodness of the good dirt.

Don't worry, this post is not about me and not about my amateur gardening escapades. Talking about wine, do you think the soil is important? Would you want the best possible soil for your vines, the richest and the most nutritious? Or would you believe that someone would purposefully choose the plot with the poorest possible soil, and plant there the vineyard of their dreams?



Enter Steve Lutz, who did exactly that.

In the year 2000, after searching for the perfect vineyard site for 8 months, Steve Lutz climbed a steep hill on the outskirts of the town of Yamhill in Northern Oregon, and after an hour of negotiations became an owner of the plot where Lenné vineyard was planted. The chosen site had peavine soil, which is not all that rich in the nutrients. Couple that with the steep slope and no irrigation, and you got the ideal farming conditions, right?

In 2001, 11 acres of Pinot Noir vines were planted, consisting of 3 blocks (one Pinot Noir clone per block). In the first year, Steve lost 35% of his plantings. In 2003, the additional 2.5 acres were planted, only to lose practically all of it to the record heat in the same year. It was only in 2007 that Steve was able to harvest enough fruit to vinify individual Pinot Noir clones. Also in 2007, Steve opened the tasting room, and the rest of it is a history which you can read for yourself on [Lenné Estate web site](#).

I had an opportunity to [virtually, of course] sit down with Steve and ask him a few questions – here is what came out of our conversation:

1. Before you purchased that parcel of land that became Lenné, what made you to believe that that soil can produce great Pinot Noir wines?

All great soils for growing grapes have low nutrient value that limits the vines vigor. The soil type I am on is classified as the poorest Ag soil in Yamhill County. I knew the shallow, low nutrient, sedimentary soil would produce smaller clusters and berries with more concentration.

2. It took you about 6 years (from 2001 to 2007) to get to any level of commercial success. How many times (if ever) you were ready to declare the project to be a failure?

Well there was too much sweat equity and personal money involved to turn back, but after we planted a 2.5 acre block in 2003 (one of the hottest springs ever) and lost all of it, we came close.

3. The soil at Lenné sounds it can produce some other interesting wines – have you thought about planting grapes other than Pinot Noir, let's say Syrah?

Well, we have grafted some Pinot to Chardonnay and have thought about grafting a little over to Gewurztraminer. The issue is that you can't do much because it isn't economically viable. We do have a neighbor that grows syrah which I find interesting but it's a little like swimming upstream; cool weather Syrah is fascinating with bottle age but a hard sell young.

4. Outside of your own wines, what is your most favorite wine what you ever tasted?

Well, years ago I had all the DRC wines about a half a dozen times and those would have to be my favorites.

5. Looking at the names of your wines, I'm assuming Jill's 115 and Eleanor's 114 are named after your daughters?

No, Jill is my mother in law who lives in England and Eleanor is named after my late mother. We also have a wine called Karen's Pommard named after my wife.

6. Along the same lines, I'm sure there should be a story behind the name of "Kill Hill"?

Yes, that is the most shallow, stressed soil in the vineyard and we had many dead vines when we planted there in spite of burning out a clutch on a tractor trying to keep them watered the first year. I always referred to it as "kill hill" because of all the mortality. When we finally got it established I decided to blend the two clones there (114 and 667) and call it "Kill Hill."

7. You are teaching a class for the wine consumers on Dundee Hills and Yamhill-Carlton District soils, Red and Black, which includes blind tasting. How often do your students identify the wines correctly to the type of soil?

Probably about 70% of the time.

8. Do you plan to expand the vineyard in the future, perhaps Pinot Gris or Chardonnay?

No, we have planted most of which is plantable.

9. I understand that you are using low intervention, dry farming. Do you have any plans to obtain any certifications, such as LIVE, or maybe even going all the way into biodynamics?

We are looking at the LIVE program right and I have thought about experimenting with biodynamics though I think some of the practices are more about marketing than having anything to do with good farming practices.

10. I'm really curious about particular significance of "11 month in oak" which seems all of your wines are going through. Why exactly 11 months? Do you ever change the duration of time the wine spends in oak based on the qualities of the particular vintage?

No, not really. The practice is based partially on practicality in that we like to get the wines out of the barrel before harvest. But having said that my philosophy is to get the wines in the bottle as intact as possible. Letting them sit in oak for extended periods of time leads to oxidation. Pinot is very sensitive to oxidation and I would rather put it in the bottle with as much of a reflection of the vineyard as possible and let what happens in the bottle happen. Some vintages could benefit in terms of mouthfeel with extended barrel aging, but they will get that in the bottle and have less oxidation than if you gave them extended barrel age.

11. If you would have an opportunity to "do over", would you choose any other location for your winery, or may be more generally, what would you do differently?

I would do a lot of things differently in terms of the way we started, attention to detail in terms of farming the first year. We were in such a hurry to put the plants in the ground that we didn't have our farming practices completely dialed in with the right equipment. As far as the site I can honestly say there is not another 21 acre site in Oregon that I would even think about trading my site for. The one thing we got completely right was finding the site.

Time to taste some wine, isn't it? I had an opportunity to taste Steve's basic Pinot Noir, and I can tell you that left on the kitchen table, the bottle was gone in no time. Here are my notes:

2014 Lenné Pinot Noir Willamette Valley (14.2% ABV, \$38)

C: Garnet

N: Smoke, lavender, ripe blackberries, medium intensity

P: tart cherries, fresh, vibrant acidity, firm tannins and firm structure, earthiness, excellent balance

V: 8-, very good wine, food friendly, will evolve with time

Here you are, my friends – another story of Passion and Pinot – now it is all about the soil and believing in yourself. We are not done yet, so until the next time – cheers!