

St. Innocent, Willamette Valley



Mark Vlossak grew up tasting wine at the side of his father, who imported fine wine on the side for a group of buddies in a wine club (the container truck would pull up to the house once a year and all these guys would unload the wine, distribute it among themselves, and throw a party). After a postgraduate degree in medicine, he moved to Oregon to practice pediatrics. In 1983, he re-discovered his passion for wine, and this led to school at UC Davis as well as a two-year apprenticeship at Oregon's Arterberry Winery. In 1988, Mark founded St. Innocent Winery, named for his father, who was born on All Innocent's Day and christened with the middle name of Innocent.

Mark has a European sensibility when it comes to wine. Ten years after starting his winery, he went to Burgundy. There, in a defining moment, he came to understand that the innate qualities of great Pinot Noir do not come from the more-is-better philosophy that guides many in the new world. Intensity of extraction, for example, does not result in a more powerful wine. He's come to believe that great Pinot Noir is created when exactly the right balance of fruit, tannin, and phenolic components are captured during the fermentation of perfectly ripe fruit. Perfectly ripe, of course, is a wildly subjective phrase, and it helps to know that Mark is firmly in the less-is-more school, and this informs his harvesting decisions. He's into nuance, layered richness, balance and finesse rather than brute strength.

He works with the Pinot family—Pinot Noir, Blanc, and Gris—and some tasty Chardonnay from Dijon clones. He focuses intently on viticulture and discovering top vineyard sites. A committed *terroirist*, his guiding philosophy is to tailor vineyard work to each site so that the attributes of each are expressed in its wine. He looks for balance between leaves and fruit in his vines, he works with low yields, and he harvests according to how the grapes taste. Every year, just to keep himself honest, he travels to Burgundy and Alsace for extensive tastings.

From 1994-1999 he was the winemaker at Panther Creek, but these days he's full time with St. Innocent. In 2007 he moved out of the tiny winery he had built in a little industrial park in Salem (a practical place without a shred of romance) to a state-of-the-art facility deep in the Eola-Amity Hills. The facility is the Zenith Vineyards, and St. Innocent bought an interest in this LLC during its conceptual phase, allowing Mark to design the cellar from start to finish. Here, for the first time, he's got his own vineyard. Altogether, he makes wine from seven sites, listed below.

Mark's father, by the way, is still going strong in the wine business—helping his kid sell St. Innocent wines in the Wisconsin and Chicago markets. That's him in the photo with the big black horn rims.

The Wines

- *Villages Cuvée*: The base of this wine comes from the Pinot Noir plantation at Vitae Springs vineyard, but in a given year any number of single-vineyard cuvées (or individual barrels) can be declassified into this cuvée if they don't make the cut.
- *Zenith (Eola-Amity Hills AVA)*: In 1989, Mark made his first single-vineyard bottling—an O'Conner Pinot Noir from a vineyard growing in the foothills between the Bethel Heights and Christom wineries. He continued to make wine from this site for ten years, until the vineyard was leased to another winery. In 2002 the vineyard was sold, replanted and expanded, and today it's known as the Zenith Vineyard. It is now Mark's estate vineyard, comprised of nine blocks totaling 13.5 acres, roughly twenty percent of the total (the rest of the grapes are sold to other wineries). These blocks are planted to four clones of Pinot Noir on two different rootstocks, and the early results show the elegant fruit and smoky profile of the old O'Conner wines. Once all the blocks have come of age, the annual production will average 1,700 cases.

- *Momtazi (McMinnville AVA)*: The biodynamically farmed Momtazi Vineyard is in the McMinnville AVA, Oregon's western most appellation. Viticulturally, the defining influences are enormous elevation changes in this vineyard, the daytime warmth and the nighttime cold, and the poor soil. Momtazi's vines grow alongside of the Van Duzer pass that cuts through the coast range to the ocean, opening up a cold wind corridor. Mark buys grapes from 11.5 acres, more than half of which comes from the highest parcels with the most meager soil, and face south-southeast rather than the prevailing hotter southwest exposure of the vineyard. The wine is darkly-fruited, powerful, and intense. Along with Freedom Hill, this bottling of Saint Innocent Pinot Noir is the most structured of the range. Annual production averages 1,500 cases.
- *Freedom Hill (Willamette Valley AVA)*: Mark has made wine from this vineyard since 1992, but it's been replanted due to phylloxera. This is as far west as the Momtazi vineyard, but to the south, and is part of the general Willamette Valley American Viticultural Area rather than a subset AVA. Saint Innocent oversees seven acres of Pinot Noir divided between mid-slope and top of the slope parcels, and bottles roughly 1,000 cases each year—most of which, for now, goes into the Villages Cuvée.

In addition, Saint Innocent oversees a terrific six-acre parcel of Chardonnay. The parcel is planted to several Dijon clones and the wine is made in older barrels. There are also 3 acres of Pinot Blanc, of which roughly two-thirds are made in tank and one-third in older barrels. The average production of the Chardonnay is 1,000 cases and that of the Pinot Blanc 500 cases.

- *Shea (Yamhill-Carlton District AVA)*: With the Dundee AVA, the Yamhill-Carlton District AVA is the most protected from the cold Pacific winds, and this tends to emphasize fruit above spice and structure in the wines. Mark's Pinot Noir from this well known site is a layered, round wine that ages well. Saint Innocent oversees two parcels here. One is 4.5 acres and planted to two clones of Pinot Noir; the other is 2.3 acres and used to be planted to Pinot Gris until phylloxera got it. This latter parcel will be in full production with the 2010 vintage. At that time, annual production of Shea Pinot Noir will be 900 cases.
- *Temperance Hill (Eola-Amity Hills AVA)*: Farmed organically, this vineyard sits on top of the Eola Hills between the Bethel Heights and Christom Wineries in the Eola-Amity Hills AVA. It is cold, low-yielding, and late to ripen. The wine is intensely aromatic, fresh, and earthy. Mark has three blocks here totaling about nine acres, but one block is planted on its own rootstock and is dying from phylloxera. Average annual production is around 600 cases.
- *Justice (Eola-Amity Hills AVA)*: Justice is farmed by Ted Casteel, the highly respected viticulturalist at Bethel Heights, and most of the grapes from this 23-acre vineyard go to that winery. Mark controls a small 2.33-acre parcel, a gem in his portfolio because he considers Justice, young though it is (vintage '08 is its eighth leaf), to be one of the best sites he knows. The elusive "Eola spice" shines through in Saint Innocent's Justice Pinot Noir. The vineyard is located just over the east ridge of the Eola-Amity AVA and grows on a mix of volcanic and sedimentary soils. Annual production of Saint Innocent's bottling is around 350 cases.
- *Vitae Springs (Willamette Valley AVA)*: Like Shea and Justice, Vitae Springs grows around the 500-foot elevation on hills to the south of Salem. Mark buys both Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris here, controlling five acres of each variety. Normally, the Pinot Noir is the basis for his Villages Cuvée, but in 2007 part of this wine made up half of the component of his winemaker's cuvée (a kind of reserve wine). As for the Pinot Gris, the first Saint Innocent bottling was with the 1993 vintage. Today, Mark makes roughly 750 cases a year in steel tanks and models his Pinot Gris on Alsace, looking for a textured mouth feel.