



Background—When two clones of Auxerrois (ohk-sair-wah) arrived in Oregon from Alsace in 1977, we had barely heard of the variety. Still, after tasting some experimental wines made at Oregon State University, our interest was piqued. It turns out that Auxerrois, like Chardonnay, Aligoté, Gamay, and 10 other varieties, is a medieval cross between the noble Pinot noir grape of Burgundy and an ignoble variety, Gouais blanc. Auxerrois is the name of the duchy around the town of Auxerre, near Chablis, but the variety is not grown there now. In fact, there are probably only 500 acres of the variety worldwide. It is only a major variety in Luxembourg, where its early ripening is a real plus. It is considered a second-class citizen in Alsace, used somewhat interchangeably with Pinot blanc, but the occasional bottlings of this variety alone have remarkable purity.

Vineyards—Starting in the mid-1980's, we planted the variety sequentially at three different vineyard sites. Wines made from the first two plantings never gave us reason to bottle them on their own. However, our third planting, at our Ribbon Springs Vineyard, coincided with our increased understanding of how to grow and produce white wines in our region (specifically by avoiding drought stress in the vineyard and bitterness in our winemaking regime.) The Ribbon Springs block, just 1.65 acres, was planted in 1990. The 2003 vintage was the first significant crop.

Growing Season—Even in March, it looked to be an early year. Although winter was as rainy as usual, spring was warm enough that bud-break occurred around Easter, and flowering was a mid-June event (under beautiful skies). Ripening continued during a very warm August and September. With no history of this variety at this site, we pretty much left the block alone. When we were checking the ripeness of some nearby Pinot gris, we ventured into the Auxerrois block to taste the grapes. Imagine our surprise – the grapes were not just ripe, but heading toward overripeness. We mobilized the vineyard and winery crews and picked the 3¼ tons two days later, on September 15.

Winemaking—In our cool climate, production of white wines requires not only optimum grape ripeness, but gentle handling of the fruit during the winemaking process as well. Following a light, whole-cluster pressing in our membrane press to separate the juice from the skins as quickly as possible, the juice was settled for 24 hours to separate the clear juice from the gross lees. Winemaker Dave Paige oversaw the wine's fermentation at cool temperatures in stainless steel tanks. He kept the wine from undergoing malolactic fermentation in order to retain all the gorgeous fresh fruit aromas possible. After a light filtration, the wine was bottled in late March 2004.

The Wine—When Auxerrois grapes become overripe, as they did for us in 2003, the resulting wine takes on aromas of orange, quince and honey, and acquires body and length. Tasters have also talked about kiwi and Asian pear aromas and the wine's crisp and refreshing texture. Wonderful on its own as an apéritif, it is also an ideal accompaniment to shellfish and other courses at the beginning of a meal. Since it is our first wine from this variety, we can make no claims about its ageability...except, why would you not drink this wine tonight?

The Label—This Auxerrois joins our growing line of white wines from rare varieties, whimsically called “wacky whites”. Also available are our Pinot blanc, Tocai Friulano, and Deglacé (dessert-style Pinot noir.) The labels on all of them have a simple drawing of the vineyard at our winery late in summer, drawn by Portland artist, Bob Bredemeier.

Production—We produced 145 cases of this 2003 Willamette Valley Auxerrois. It is the first Auxerrois bottled in the western U.S., though earlier bottlings have been noted from Michigan and British Columbia wineries.