

NEWS

Bollinger Champagne Owners Buy Oregon's Ponzi Vineyards

A pioneering Willamette Valley family, who arrived in the region in 1969 when Oregon Pinot Noir was considered impractical, sells control to marquee Champagne house



Sisters Anna Maria, left, and Luisa Ponzi have worked as CEO and winemaker, respectively, for the Oregon winery their parents founded. (Carolyn Wells-Kramer)

By [Tim Fish](#)
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[Ponzi Vineyards](#), a pioneer of Oregon wine, has been acquired by the Bollinger family, owners of [Champagne Bollinger](#). It's Bollinger's first winery purchase outside France. The sale price was not disclosed but the deal includes the 40,000-case winery and hospitality facilities in Willamette Valley and 35 acres of vineyards. The Ponzi family retains 100 acres of vineyards and will continue to sell grapes to Bollinger under a long-term contract.

Founders Dick and Nancy Ponzi handed control of the winery to their children nearly 30 years ago. CEO Anna Maria Ponzi will oversee sales and marketing until a new CEO is in place. Luisa Ponzi will continue her duties as director of viticulture and winemaking.

Société Jacques Bollinger (SJB), the Bollinger family's holding company, has eyed the U.S. for years. "The main reason SJB selected a Willamette Valley winery is based on the latitude of this region and its climate similarities to that of Burgundy and Champagne," chairman and CEO Etienne Bizot told *Wine Spectator*. "If there was anywhere outside of France where we felt it was critical to invest, it is in the U.S. We have quietly considered opportunities for a number of years, but it is finally with the Ponzi family that we feel we have found the ideal fit."

The Bollinger family has been producing Champagne since 1829 and, in addition to the Bollinger and Ponzi brands, they own Ayala in Champagne, Chanson Père & Fils in Burgundy, Delamain in Cognac and Langlois-Chateau in the Loire Valley.

"It feels a bit surreal right now," said Luisa with a laugh. "We never really thought about selling until we were presented this opportunity from Bollinger. We've always had great respect for Bollinger, and to see that they had interest in our winery was flattering." She added that she feels both companies share a commitment to quality and sustainability.

There are no plans to expand production, which is currently at 30,000 cases annually. Luisa says the vineyards are healthy and thriving. The winery and visitors center are both less than a decade old. Bollinger, for its part, brings its considerable sales muscle to Ponzi.

While no longer involved in the winery financially, the elder Ponzis approve of the sale. "It's their baby, obviously," said Luisa. "We would not have pursued this path if they had any hesitation."

The Ponzi family arrived in Oregon in 1969 in a flatbed truck that carried two cats, a dog, a canoe, a piano and four barrels of homemade wine. Inspired by a vacation in Burgundy, Dick had been making wine at home for years in California. Engineering was his day job at the time, and one of his earliest projects was helping create the first Ford Mustang. Ponzi also designed rockets until he decided he was morally opposed to the Vietnam War. He was creating rides for Disney before the family moved to Oregon.

Willamette Valley was a different place in the early 1970s when the Ponzis started planting vines. There were only four wineries at the time and the main crops were hazelnuts, cherries, apples and hay. Experts at University of California at Davis claimed that Oregon was too cold to grow Pinot Noir, but the Ponzis thought otherwise. They befriended likeminded winemaking amateurs like David Lett, Dick Erath and David Adelsheim, and together they laid the groundwork for Oregon's modern winemaking industry.

The arrival of Bollinger is a plus for Oregon, as Luisa sees it. "It shows further validation of what we've been doing here. This is all good news for our region and valley."

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