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OREGON'S WINE ON THE FARM

Get to know the
producers who are
growing beyond the
vineyard.

BY PAUL GREGUTT
PHOTOS BY PEDRO OLIVEIRA

Wine grape-growing is a type of farming, but more and more wineries are diving into a complete, holistic approach that incorporates winemaking into a broader farm-oriented lifestyle. These five Oregon winery farms prove that there are as many paths to success as there are vintners able to handle the challenges.



The Joys of Problem Solving *Big Table Farm*

Clare Carver and Brian Marcy admit that they have “made a lot of mistakes” in the 15 years that they’ve owned and developed Big Table Farm. But that confession comes with a heaping side order of joy.

“The big, sloppy, naïve experimentation is behind us,” says Carver with a grin. “We’ve earned our stripes. We have a deep understanding that we’re working from. So, no more rookie mistakes that are hard on the land, on the animals and on the humans.”

It’s a lot of work to take care of cattle, chickens, goats, draft horses, pigs, sheep, beehives and guard dogs. There were also the painstaking multiyear tasks of barn and winery building, the annual planting of vegetable gardens, tending compost and clearing hillside land to plant an estate vineyard. One might suppose these two are tapped out.

Not even close.

Carver is a professional artist with a thriving studio. She designs the winery’s hand-drawn and letterpress-printed labels. Marcy is in the midst of fencing, planning and planting the first estate vineyard. As with everything they undertake, the seemingly straightforward task of clearing trees and underbrush has been an opportunity to learn, innovate and find a better eco-friendly solution.

“We have never done a brush burn in 15 years because we are carbon sensitive,” says Carver, referring to the idea that the smoke from a burn would cause further pollution. So what to do with piles of brush from the 13-acre hillside?

They contacted a company called Blackwood Solutions that uses a Carbonator to convert the brush into biochar through a low-oxygen, high-temperature burn that puts no carbon into the air. What’s left is basically charcoal, which goes into the compost pile.

“Everything we’ve done in the past is informing what we’re about to do next,” says Marcy. “We’re learning about soil, how active it is, a whole unseen aspect of life that to me is just fascinating. And the contribution that animals make to the health of the world, the microbiology they move around in their guts. Ruminants are basically fermentation vessels on legs. They convert cellulose into protein and fat in a way that nothing else can.”

Wine to try: Big Table Farm 2019 The Wild Bee Chardonnay (Willamette Valley); \$30.



Ardent Environmentalism *Mineral Springs Ranch*

Tony Soter says his late wife, Michelle, inspired and helped create a farm and winery dedicated to environmentalism, organics, biodynamics, nutrition and holistic living. On an early spring stroll around the 240-acre property, he dove eagerly into the details.

Wine, he says, takes an agricultural commodity, grapes, and adds value. “So much of agriculture is commodity driven,” says Soter. “And it doesn’t leave much profit if you want to be a successful small farmer.”

His idea is to inspire other small farmers to add value to their products so they can sell



“What we hope [for] is the reinvention of small rural agriculture as a way to make a living and to put people back in the land.”

In the vineyard, the emphasis is on a scientific approach to biodynamic practices,



Oregon's Olioteca Durant *Red Ridge Farms*

Many wineries vie for grapes from Durant Vineyard. You'll find its name featured on dozens of bottles from leading Willamette Valley producers. In addition, the estate winery produces around 5,000 cases a year, principally Pinot Noir, along with Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and a lovely rosé.

A number of talented winemakers have made wine with these estate vines, such as Marcus Goodfellow, Joe Dobbies, Isabelle Dutarte and most recently, Spencer Spetnagel, who came from King Estate in 2018.

But despite the success of the vineyard and its wines, Paul Durant, the owner and general manager, is most excited about his extra-virgin olive oils.

His parents purchased the property in the early 1970s. Immediately, they planted vines and grew walnuts, cherries and hazelnuts.

"They had no money, so they bought cheap hillside dirt that doesn't produce well for row crops," says Durant. "So now 40 years later, it's the most sought-after ground in the county. They got a lottery ticket."

The expansive 135-acre property includes a well-stocked gift shop, tasting room, short-term lodging and plant nursery. That's in addition to 17 acres of olive trees planted starting in 2004. A desire to try something new ("it's in the family DNA," says Durant) initiated the project, but it's his implacable enthusiasm that sustains it.

"Within the olive-tree world, there's all different varieties, but the arc of time takes a long while to really figure out how to grow them," he says. The gift shop offers a number of varietal oils and many other homegrown and local products.

As visitors begin to return to the farm, a new Italian olive mill is planned to replace the well-worn original. Durant plans to quadruple production, currently up to 8,000 gallons a year.

During the pandemic, Durant says olive oil sustained the business.

"This is what I've always wanted to do," he says. "We don't aspire to be big wine producers. Four to six thousand cases of wine a year. That's it. I like the customer connection."

Wine to try: Durant 2019 Southview Pinot Gris (Dundee Hills); \$25.



Grazing-Based Viticulture *Antiquum Farm*

Ask Owner Stephen Hagen to explain what he means by grazing-based viticulture, and prepare for a doctoral thesis. Topics range from animal husbandry and the irrelevance of clones to the growth of upside-down grape clusters with mutant berries.

The idea behind grazing-based viticulture, says Hagen, is to coax site-specific terroir from a particular place.

He and his wife, Niki, began to plant shortly after they purchased the property in 1999. From the start, they farmed organically. Some years later, he says, "a light bulb popped off in my head as I was spreading organic amendments. I was asking people how they get expression



“This is not a system, this is a lifestyle. This never stops. There’s no Sunday, no vacation. The timing is where the art is. No one else in the world is doing what we do.”

place. And the answer was always, ‘by farming organically.’ But we’re all using the same stuff. I realized we’re talking about this thing, but we’re not really doing it.”

The quest for unique site-specific terroir became increasingly complicated.

“What is compost?” he asks. “It’s forage passed through the animals. So why not skip the cows and start farming microbes? How do we get wines that really have a personality, that really feel alive? You fill the vineyard up with life.”

In the course of experiments, Antiquum (pronounced ann-tick-you-um) has grown on 140 acres, 21 of which are under vine. The

vineyard is divided up into much smaller segments amenable to what Hagen calls “rotational intensive grazing.”

In simple terms, animals are rotated through in a specific order based upon grazing habits and the vines’ growing cycle. First pigs, then sheep, followed by geese (“pound for pound, nothing grazes like geese”). Finally, the chickens enter.

“The grazers have exposed the insects and also pooped,” says Hagen. “The chickens go through the manure, scratching it, exposing the insect larvae, eating the eggs and anything that hatches. I call them the ‘weeding and sanitation crew.’”

The operation requires substantial numbers of these animals, which must be fed, sheltered and protected from predators. Seven large dogs roam the property. They’re the glue that holds the structure together.

“This is not a system,” he says. “This is a lifestyle. This never stops. There’s no Sunday, no vacation. The timing is where the art is. Leaving enough material to photosynthesize and recover, but not letting it go to seed. No one else in the world is doing what we do.”

Wine to try: Antiquum Farm 2018 Juel Pinot Noir (Willamette Valley); \$40.



Wines, Weddings and Silo Suites *Abbey Road Farm*

Abbey Road Winemaker James Rahn sits at a picnic table and sips rosé on a warm late-winter afternoon. Just four years ago, the site was a grass-seed farm with stables and a horse arena.

The property has been almost magically transformed into a manicured 82-acre farm. It hosts special events and weddings, offers overnight lodging in a renovated grain silo and features walking tours and luxurious breakfasts prepared by Will Preisch, the innkeeper and chef.

Owners Sandi and Daniel Wilkens are partners in Quaintrelle, a Portland farm-to-table restaurant. Their original goal of a special events venue is changing, says Rahn.

After he joined Abbey Road Farm in 2018, the first wines Rahn made were rosés for wedding parties and tasting room sales.

Demand took off quickly, and vineyard planting began that October.

Already, 16 varieties have been planted that include under-the-Willamette-radar grapes like Aligoté, Godello, Mencia, Mondeuse, Poulsard, Trousseau and Trousseau Gris. These are part of a plan to expand beyond wines made from the region's standard program of Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Rahn's years as a sommelier and previous efforts to market his own wines convinced him it was much easier to offer different varieties than sell yet another Pinot Noir to a restaurant that might already have dozens on the list. From a business standpoint, he says, less well-known varieties can succeed because people, especially millennials, are hungry to try something different.

"Another school of thought is we don't know what else is going to thrive here," he says. "Which is not to snub Pinot Noir. That is the legacy, and I'm thankful for that. But we want to have fun. Is this going to work here? We're going to give it a go. And with grafting, you don't lose a single vintage."

Ultimately, plans for Abbey Road Farm include an on-site incubator winery and enough gardens to supply Quaintrelle and local markets with fresh produce. But the main goal is to be a place where visitors may enjoy the best of Oregon's food, wine and hospitality.

Wine to try: Abbey Road Farm 2018 Chardonnay (Willamette Valley); \$37.