VITICULTURE

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Labor shortage drove farm into viticulture

By PARIS ACHEN
For the Capital Press

Nearly every Tuesday around 3 p.m., Dick Crannell settles onto his regular stool at the Brooks Wine tasting room in Oregon's Eola-Amity Hills, always with "a wise word and chuckle," according to Janie Brooks Heuck, the winery's managing director.

He usually brings a bottle from his own cellar and opens it for whoever happens to be around, including staff and visitors.

"I've got a fair amount of wine that I don't even know what I'm gonna do with," Crannell said, "so I might as well share it and enjoy it with others."

Wine is now an integral part of the history of the Crannell family property, which is adjacent to Brooks Wine. When his grandfather bought the property sight unseen more than a century ago, he acquired land that was rich volcanic basalt soil. Today, that soil contributes to the depth and texture of Willamette Valley red wines.

Crannell's grandparents were running a boarding house in Douglas, Alaska, when they saw a magazine advertisement for the land and bought it. Crannell still lives in the house that his grandfather built on the property in 1914.

He remembers getting off the school bus at his grandparents' house, eating snacks, and riding around the farm with his grandfather.

Crannell left Oregon at 18 to join the Air Force, where he spent four years as a radio mechanic working on aircraft including B-52 bombers. He eventually returned to Amity after an uncle who had been running the farm died and his father needed help.

"So I said I'll do it," Crannell recalled.

For 25 years, Crannell worked two jobs: as a plumbing superintendent in town, then returned home around 4 or 4:30 p.m. and cultivated cherries, walnuts, and other crops until dark.

Eventually, a labor shortage drove the farm's transition to viticulture in 1984.

"There was a labor problem for handpicked cherries," Crannell said. "Just less and less people [were] willing to climb a ladder. So it was time to switch into something else."

His neighbor, Don Byard, encouraged Crannell to plant wine grapes. Byard planted the original parcel of land that later became Brooks Wine, Brooks Heuck said.

There was little formal viticulture education available when Crannell began planting. Growers in the area learned from each other and through experience, he said.

"We just carried on and relied on neighbors that were also in the business," he said. "We just learned from each other."

Today, Crannell's 18-acre vineyard grows mostly pinot noir, along with pinot blanc, two types of muscat, and Blaufränkisch, often called "Blue Frankish." He previously sold grapes to Amity Vineyards and has worked exclusively with Brooks since 2013.



JANIE BROOKS HEUCK /CONTRIBUTED

Dick Crannell was growing cherries until a labor shortage forced him to switch crops. A neighbor suggested he grow wine grapes instead.

Brooks now leases the organically farmed vineyard and handles spraying and management decisions, while Crannell tends to other tasks.

"I do all the tractor work," Crannell said. "They do all the decision making and pay the big bills."

Brooks has turned Crannell's grapes into wines carrying his family name, including a recent vintage that Brooks Heuck described as among the winery's favorites.

Asked what it is like to drink wine bearing his name, made from grapes grown on his grandfather's land, Crannell's reply was succinct:

"A sense of pride," he replied.

Without experience, owners grow a business

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

Olalla Vineyard and Winery near Olalla, Wash., was previously owned by Joe and Konnie Serka who developed it into the beautiful place it is today. In 2015 Mary Ellen Houston and her husband found out the winery was for sale and fell in love with it when they drove onto the property. The estate has six acres of beautiful property and about three acres of vineyard.

"We didn't have any winery experience and had never run a business; we both came from corporate America, but wanted to do this. We found a winemaker, Matthew Loso, the Master Winemaker and original owner of Matthews Cellars in Woodinville, one of the most-respected wineries in Washington State, and asked him to look at the property. He did, and told us it was a great opportunity," Mary Ellen says.

"We didn't have any winery experience and had never run a business; we both came from corporate America, but wanted to do this."

Mary Ellen Houston
Olalla Vineyard and Winery

"The older couple who owned it were doing it as a hobby, with a tasting room open during summer weekends. They made wine from grapes they planted in 1999 — three white varietals and three red varietals — in small quantities the vineyard could produce."

It can be a challenge to grow grapes in Western Washington because of the cool, wet weather.

"We made plans to increase production by purchasing grapes from Eastern Washington vineyards while still making wine from the estate grapes in Olalla. We also wanted to

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Dahlias on a wine barrel at Olalla Vineyard and Winery near Olalla, Wash. Mary Ellen Houston and her husband didn't have any wine experience when they bought the property.



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Olalla

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make this an event venue, with dinners, weddings and concerts. We asked Matthew Loso to bring his wine-making experience and expertise to our vineyard and winery. We opened in June of 2016," she says.

Over the next seven years, they grew the business into a popular event venue with dinners in the vineyard, live music concerts and corporate events, offering world-class wines. "We started hosting live music every Friday evening, and special wine-paired dinners by local chefs. It is a popular place for people to come and relax and enjoy themselves," Mary Ellen says.

Sadly, she and her husband separated in 2022 and divorced in 2024. He wanted to sell the property and she didn't. "It was more my passion than his. Through mediation he agreed that I could buy him out."

She has been running it herself, with a little help.

"I have three seasonal employees in the tasting room and some dear friends who like to volunteer. It's been a joy to be able to continue doing this, and the people around me are very supportive. It takes community and it's been a wonderful team," she says.

The white varietals she grows are Pinot Gris, Viognier, and Madeleine Angevine. The reds are Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, and a unique grape called Golubok from the Ukraine. "It's my flagship wine, and I am one of only two vineyards in Washington that grow that particular grape. The former owners chose it because thrives in cooler temperatures and is well suited to the Puget Sound climate," Mary Ellen says.

Most of the varietals grown by the former owners didn't do as well.

"We had to replace some with Pinot Noir and Madeleine Angevine. The grapes we have now seem to do better and people love the wine I'm producing from grapes I buy from Eastern Washington; I work with my winemaker on that," she says.

She feels good to have become successful, with no background or experience.

"Any business is hard these days. I think if a person can make it through the first few years, they have a better chance. I went through a barn fire, COVID, divorce, and many challenges, but now my wine club is growing and people love to come here. We celebrated 10 years since the grand opening with an open-house party in June. We do tastings, wine by the glass, by the bottle, and charcuterie baskets that people take into the vineyard and enjoy."

The property is on a promontory with a beautiful view of Vashon Island and Puget Sound.

"My big season is summer, but I host live music year round and this draws people in, and soon we'll be hosting trivia every other Friday."

She plans to keep running this business as long as she can. "The Kitsap Peninsula is a lovely area."



Vines at Olalla Vineyard and Winery near Olalla, Wash.





A winery built off a brand

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

The Y Knot Winery and vineyard in Glenns Ferry, Idaho, produces 14 different wines and is a perfect place for people to hang out when they need a break from a busy life.

In addition to the vineyard, Y Knot includes a restaurant, golf course and two RV parks. This winery has been crafting wine for over 40 years.

Teresa McCallum and her late husband had a cattle ranch and large farm nearby, and after his passing, she still runs the ranch and farm in addition to the winery. The winery was always her passion.

The name of their label brand came about because she wanted to keep a western theme and have a cattle brand as her logo.

"My husband wouldn't let me use our ranch brand, and I asked 'Why not?' and then I realized that phrase would make a brand! The Y looks like a wine glass, and the knot is on its stem. It's been fun to work with that logo." It's also very catchy and people remember it.

"We've entered wines in the Pacific Northwest Wine and Cider Show and earned a few medals and a double gold for our Riesling. Our talented winemaker, Jamie Martin, came on board nine years ago and makes outstanding wine. He's made wine for 45 years and was one of the first winemakers in Idaho," says Teresa. He now has an apprentice — his daughter Emily Gregory, who is going through classes to become the new winemaker.

Teresa buys most of the grapes in the Hagerman Valley and some from the Sunnyslope area of Idaho to augment the ones grown on site in their own vineyard.



Y Knot Winery winemaker Jamie Martin and owner Teresa McCallum.

Conditions in certain areas of Idaho are perfect for growing wine grapes.

"Grapes grown in the Snake River Valley, especially the eastern end of this AVA, have a lot more minerality than most." Minerality is the term to describe a flavor that is not spice, herb or fruit. The flavor or aroma of minerality of a wine is associated with the terroir or origin of the wine, especially if the region has rocky soil, high in minerals.

"This gives a lot more character in the taste of the wines," Teresa says. This is a very temperate zone, along the river, and growers don't have to fight harsh winters. The heat of summer, however, brings on some very nice sugars.



Harvesting grapes at Y Knot Winery in Glenns Ferry, Idaho.

"We recently replanted some of the old vines. We inter-planted new vines and ended up with about 1.5 acres of additional Lemberger vines because we ordered too many plants. We've had amazing harvests over the past two years—double production from our old numbers. We grow Riesling and Lemberger on site and contract for our Cabernet Franc, Syrah and Chardonnay." Teresa says

"We started doing a Rose of Lemberger which turned out to be very popular. We named it Blue Rose which is a take on our proprietary Lemberger red wine, Blue Noir. One of the unique things about our vineyard is that I've been told there are only about 80 acres of Lemberger grown in the Pacific Northwest, and we have 10 of those acres. Most of the other growers use it in a blend. I think we are the only one who makes a straight Lemberger wine, and our Rose of Lemberger is also well received and is a very popular wine with our guests."



Hedges Family Estate puts focus on organic soil health

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

Tom Hedges was originally from Richland, Wash., working in the produce export market. In 1976 he married Anne-Marie in her hometown in France. Their daughter Sarah was born in Buenos Aires and traveled extensively with her family. Then Tom was asked to produce a Washington State table wine for sale in Sweden and in 1986 the family settled in Seattle to start Hedges Family Estate. Their vineyard was planted in 1990 in Eastern Washington, in the Red Mountain area.

Today their daughter Sarah is the winemaker and their son Christophe is in charge of sales. Their vineyard manager is Reid Wilson. Before he got into viticulture Reid was a professional soccer player.

"Ten years ago I started as an irrigator at Mondavi in Napa, Calif., and quickly fell in love with viticulture. I soon developed empathy with people who work out in the field," Reid says. He'd played soccer in Spanish-speaking countries and this enabled him to communicate with the workers and crew members at the vineyard.

Soccer was also good preparation — to work hard, have a goal, and be part of a team and to work as a team. "Who you have in that team and their positions in that team, whether in a vineyard or in soccer, is important," he says.

"I took college classes like Viticulture 101, but back then it didn't make much sense to me, and Mother Nature didn't make sense, either. It was through talking with people out in the field, and having great mentors that solidified what it means to have a healthy landscape. That is now my goal and priority," says Reid. Having a quality crop of grapes goes hand in hand with putting the environment first. It all starts with the soil.

He worked at Pacific Crest Vineyard Services for five years, then came to Hedges as a viticulturist and vineyard manager.

"The folks here are very innovative and trying to create a movement toward more natural practices, but they are the only acreage on Red Mountain that is certified organic and practice bio-dynamics," he says.

"I keep two things in mind whenever I make a decision. First is to ask if this is best for the vines, and second is where this will take us and how is this mimicking Nature?"



Reid Wilson, vineyard manager at Hedges Family Estate. The organic winery focuses on soil health.

"It was through talking with people out in the field, and having great mentors that solidified what it means to have a healthy landscape. That is now my goal and priority,"

Tom Hedges
Hedges Family Estate

Before nitrogen fertilizer was created, everything on a farm had to be organic.

"When I came to Hedges I realized the soil needs help. Soil here is very silty and sandy with hardly any organic matter. The sad truth about conventional farming is cost. Fungicides, insecticides and fertilizers are 55% more expensive than they used to be, and also 55% less effective," Reid says.

Hedges is planting cover crops to eliminate bare ground, since exposure to air and drying kills the soil microbes. The vineyard also integrated sheep grazing to add more nitrogen via their urine and manure. Reid also adds mulch to provide more organic matter — shredding branches from trees surrounding the vineyard — and from the pomace (skins, stems, etc.) left when processing grapes. Organic matter holds moisture and aids water infiltration into the soil; water doesn't run off.



Compost and mulch in the Syrah vines at Hedges Family Estate.

Reid is also experimenting with native hybrid grapes that are hardier, and doing several trials with WSU.

One is an irrigation trial with Dr. Pete Jacoby, who invented the Direct Root-Zone (DRZ) micro-irrigation system, a subsurface irrigation technique designed to drastically reduce water use in vineyards while maintaining or enhancing grape quality. Unlike traditional subsurface irrigation that relies on horizontal buried lines — vulnerable to clogging and damage from burrowing rodents — Jacoby's system delivers water vertically, directly down to the root zone.

"We are coupling that with various sensors, including one that will be plumbed into the xylem of the vine — the transport tissue that moves water and dissolved minerals upward from the roots to the stems and leaves. These sensors will be hooked to an automatic valve that will irrigate for us, based on those pressures." This will provide the exact amount of moisture those plants need, and will be solar powered.

Columbia Hills is Washington's new American Viticultural Area

By KYLE ODEGARD
Capital Press

Columbia Hills is Washington's newest and 22nd American Viticultural Area.

On Aug. 17, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau published the final rule to officially define the Columbia Hills AVA as a designated winegrape growing region.

Columbia Hills is located in south-central Washington between the Columbia Gorge AVA to the west and the Burn of Columbia Valley AVA to the east.

It is a nested AVA, wholly contained within the sprawling Columbia Valley AVA, which crosses into Oregon.

Defining characteristics for the Columbia Hills AVA include southern slopes, proximity to the Columbia River, lower elevations and shallow soils.

At 29,387 acres, the Columbia Hills AVA is relatively small and home to only about 300 acres of winegrapes, according to a news release from the Washington State Wine Commission.

New AVA named for 35-mile ridgeline

The new appellation gets its name from a 35-mile ridgeline that parallels the north side of the Columbia River, which serves as the AVA's southern boundary.

Its northern boundary is the 1,050 elevation line.

"It is a very scenic area that features vineyards perched above the river on flood-eroded terraces," said Kevin Pogue, a Whitman College geology professor who wrote the AVA petition for Columbia Hills.

The soils are composed of thin wind-deposited silt and sand that overlies flood-eroded basalt bedrock, Pogue said, in a news release.

"Our region is made up of small, intimate, microclimate terroirs defined by their closeness to the water," said Robert Lorkowski, owner of Cascade Cliffs Vineyard and Winery, located within the appellation.

Starting Sept. 16, wineries may submit a certificate of label approval request to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau for a label using the Columbia Hills AVA as the appellation of origin.



ANDREA JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY/CONTRIBUTED

Cascade Cliffs Vineyard and Winery, with Mt. Hood in the distance, is part of the new Columbia Hills American Viticultural Area. The AVA is named after a 35-mile ridgeline that parallels the north side of the Columbia River.







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