

The fine history of southern Oregon wine

BY MELISSA RHODES

Among the beauty of southern Oregon are some of the top-rated wines in the American West. “There are a lot of good wines being produced that resemble wines from the California Sierra foothills,” says wine expert and historian Dr. Will Brown, who was generous in sharing his knowledge of the southern Oregon wine industry for this story.

Now an Ashland resident, Dr. Brown started to study wine in 1954 while in medical school after being introduced to fine wine by a professor. In 2003, Dr. Brown purchased the Bern Ramey Wine Library and donated it to Southern Oregon University (SOU). The impressive collection of 371 books, accumulated over four decades, contains many rare first editions and is housed in Hannon Library at SOU. (The late Bern Ramey was a member of the first graduating class of seven from the University of California-Davis School of Viticulture and Enology, along with the late Peter Mondavi and the late Joe Heitz, both internationally recognized Napa Valley winemakers. Ramey is the author of the 1977 *The Great Grapes and The Wines They Make*, which took over 20 years to complete.)

SOU’s growing collection, entitled “Wine of Southern

Oregon,” also contains wine bottle labels, photographs, annual price lists, and other items that have been contributed by participating area vineyards, wineries, and individuals connected to southern Oregon’s wine industry, as well as images collected by MJ Daspit and Eric Weisinger for their book *Rogue Valley Wine* (Arcadia, 2011).

These materials document the important history of grape growing and wine production in the Rogue Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA), which encompasses the drainage basin of the Rogue River and several tributaries, including the Illinois River, the Applegate River, and Bear Creek, making the collection a valuable resource for students, researchers, local vineyards, and wine makers. If you are interested in contributing wine-related items to Hannon Library Special Collections, email libdigi@sou.edu. More information about the collection is available online at <http://hanlib.sou.edu/speccoll/wine.html>.

Dr. Brown appreciates the wine produced in southern Oregon. “I would say that the Applegate Valley is the best all-around area in the Rogue for producing premium wines, but good wines come from all over, depending



Photos (top) Dr. Will Brown, wine historian. (right) Smoke-filled vineyard at Valley View. Photo: Melissa Rhodes.



on soil, climate, aspect [the direction the vines are facing], and elevation,” he explains. This is the reason that so many wineries call the Applegate Valley home and succeed in doing so.

While there are about 70 different wine grapes being grown in southern Oregon, growers are testing many varieties to see what grows best here. As a result, southern Oregon vineyards have grown not only an assortment of the Bordeaux varieties that were first planted here (e.g., cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc), but later planted Rhone Valley varieties like syrah, grenache, viognier, and tempranillo. Pinot noir, chardonnay, and pinot gris are also grown in southern Oregon.

The first winery in Oregon was created by Peter Britt in Jacksonville in the 1870s. Britt died in 1905 and his winery closed two years later. However, there were several small wineries in the Roseburg area in the late 19th century. With prohibition, all wineries closed, but some vineyardists in the Roseburg area continued to sell grapes to home winemakers, which was legal.

Wine made its comeback in the 1960s and ’70s, resulting in new wineries spread across the valley. Richard Sommer started Hillcrest Winery in Roseburg in the early 1960s. Frank Wisnovsky at Valley View Winery established the first winery in the Rogue Valley—their first wine was made in 1976. Siskiyou Winery in the Illinois Valley was opened shortly after Valley View, and was later sold to

Bridgeview Vineyards and Winery.

Today, larger vineyards are being planted. Land is cheaper in southern Oregon than in the northern parts of the state, and there is a lot of land suitable for growing grapes. At the same time, more grapes are being sent to northern Oregon wineries, which want grapes that don’t grow well in the north.

The wine industry in southern Oregon seems to be doing very well with new vineyards being planted and new wineries being opened. “There is a mystique about being in the wine industry that attracts money and people,” says Dr. Brown.

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Melissa attends SOU and plans to pursue a master’s degree in English. We thank her for researching and writing this article.

WINE BRANDING

Asante and benefits the Children’s Miracle Network. Liz coordinated the classes for both wine aficionados and wine novices and included Oregon Wine University classes by physician and wine educator Peter Adesman, MD, comparing old-world wines with southern Oregon wines. There were also classes comparing cold and hardy grape varieties, classes by Riedel glassmaker, and a tasting class with the Ledger David Cellars wine team.

There were 12 classes at the Oregon Wine University this year at the event site on Bigham Knoll Campus in Jacksonville and two classes at the Southern Oregon Wine Institute (SOWI) in the Umpqua Valley. Based on the success of this year, next year they are hoping to have two weeks of events and classes so OWE will become more of a destination for wine lovers near and far, and the classes at

the Oregon Wine University will attract more wine professionals, wine writers, as well as wine novices. According to Liz, OWE is developing into a major wine festival bringing people to southern Oregon. Besides the competition and good wines, there is also a great deal of money raised for a very worthy cause. If you didn’t attend the Oregon Wine Experience this year and you love wine, mark your calendars for this fun and informative event in August 2016.

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FARMERS’ MARKET

and other useful objects. “I will make anything to order,” he cheerily offers interested customers. Jim was born in Williams 70 years ago and still lives on the same ranch. His wife, Barbara, of Barbwire’s Creations, exclaims, “I just love to try new things.” Her display includes bracelets hammered from copper tubing and earrings of embossed metal, natural stones or horseshoe nails.

Liz Dolan Tree, volunteer coordinator, helped spearhead the market initially in 2002. She is pleased at the growing demand and dreams of finding a larger venue with more convenient parking. Liz has a wide range of experience from buying directly from farmers for a store to setting up the People’s All Organic Farmers Market in Portland years ago.

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She and co-manager Sarah Shea of White Oak Farm make sure that the market maintains the high standards that people expect. The market requires certified scales and that foods be prepared in certified kitchens. Recently, the Oregon Department of Agriculture checked the accuracy of all the scales. Organizing can be challenging at times, but the reward lies in interacting with customers face to face and sharing in the weekly fun. “I do this primarily to bring the community together,” says Sarah.

There is a lot of joy and pride at the Williams Farmers’ Market. These are key features of life in Williams, and the market represents these qualities exceptionally well.

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Handcrafted ‘Applecrates’ for sale

Beautiful planters called “Applecrates,” built with donated local wood and volunteer labor, are for sale. All proceeds will help sustain the *Applegater*. You can see these useful and long-lasting Applecrates at Applegate Valley Realty, 935 N. Fifth Street, Jacksonville. The price of a stock planter box (see photo), 12” wide x 22” long x 14” deep, starts at \$40. For more information, or volunteer to help, call Chris Bratt at 541-846-6988.



Liz Wan with Paul Gregutt, contributing editor for Wine Enthusiast magazine and author of Washington Wines & Wineries, the Essential Guide.

