

Wildfire! Drought! Cartels! Stressed about the future? Talk to an Applegate winegrower—you'll feel better

BY CHRIS AMMON

I bought my Ruch property 10 years ago. I have nectar-sweet memories of moving in, planting bulbs, and hosting dinners under my granddaddy oak tree. It was a summer of carefree discovery, blackberry-picking, paragliding, and making enough friends to nearly sink a pontoon boat in Applegate Lake. That first summer, I was sure I'd found paradise.

A decade on, some of that exuberance has faded. Wildfire smoke, the pandemic, and politics have got me down. The proliferation of illegal pot grows with their water theft and plastic hoop houses have, at times, made the cruise along the normally bucolic Highway 238 sort of, well, distressing. I sometimes worry:

What is the future of the Applegate?

Lately, though, I've found reasons to be encouraged. One, there's been a crackdown on illegal grows; plastic greenhouse trash is getting balled up and hauled out every day. Two, the spring rains made the valley lush again; poppies electrify my front yard. But the real shift in my perspective came when I attended the Applegate wine event Uncorked. There, I was inspired by the stubborn optimism of local winemakers.

Eighteen wineries showcased their new releases paired with food. For my sobriety, I limited myself to three: Valley View Winery, Quady North, and Plaisance Winery.

At Valley View, I met Mike Brunson, their new winemaker from Healdsburg. As he drew some '21 pinot noir from the barrel, I shared my worries: *"Isn't it going to get too hot? What about water?"*



"Farmers have to be ready to adapt to whatever the weather throws at them," says Mike Brunson, winemaker for Valley View Winery. Photo: Chris Ammon.

What about wildfire?" He explained that farmers *always* have to pay attention and adapt to varying conditions, climate change-related or not.

Mike explained how, when he worked for larger outfits, he faced pressure to produce consistent product year after year, regardless of climatic conditions. This maintained predictability, but also risked creating soulless wine. "You can't taste the challenges," he explains. In the Applegate, he feels free to make wines that express the seasonal variables.

I went to Quady North next. Their new tasting room is perched above Ruch and surrounding hills are bare—but only temporarily; metal stakes and reels of trellis were laid out and looked ready to stretch. While owner Herb Quady poured us merlot, he explained he pulled the site's old vines because they had "red blotch"—a

pest-transmitted disease that is difficult to eradicate. He is ready to replant in syrah, grenache, and rosé.

"Isn't it frustrating," I asked, "having to yank them up and start over?"

"Yeah, but I'm in it for the long run," he said, waving his glass to reveal a forearm tattoo that read: *"I refuse to make bad wine."* His long view comes from being around the wine industry a long time; his parents started a California winery in 1975.

"If I didn't feel optimistic, I wouldn't have built this new place," he said.

Herb showed us soil samples displayed on the walls. There was a "river wash" right off the Applegate River—good for high quality syrah and viognier. He also picked up a jar of silty loam soil, good for grapes he uses for rosé. The area's soil diversity inspires him.

"I'm all in on the Applegate," he concluded.

I ended Uncorked at Plaisance, where the owner, Joe Ginnet, was pouring his 2018 and 2020 tempranillo. That morning, one of his frost-protection fans broke and some of his crop got damaged.

Joe has been in farming long enough to know how to take such things in stride. "If you're a farmer, it's been this way since day one," he said. "There is always a frost, or a drought, or a flood. Welcome to farming." He has set up a rainwater catchment system to ensure his water supply in dry years—all the while knowing some problems can't be solved.

"I believe in the positive power of the mind. Sometimes you get spanked. And sometimes you get rewarded," he said.



"I'm all in on the Applegate," says Herb Quady, owner of Quady North. Photo: Chris Ammon.



"I believe in the positive power of the mind," says Joe Ginnet, owner of Plaisance Winery. Photo: Chris Ammon.

Far from being discouraged, Joe recently planted three acres of new vines.

Touring the wineries at Uncorked did a lot to ease my worries. The optimism of these three winemakers—Mike, Herb, and Joe—is not a fluke, but a trait shared by farmers at large.

This Will Rogers quote sums things up: "The farmer has to be an optimist—otherwise he wouldn't still be a farmer."

So, thank you, Applegate winemakers for the much-needed attitude adjustment. I feel better.

As Herb Quady says: *"I'm all in on the Applegate."*

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WOMEN AND WINE

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industry and is delighted to represent the next generation of viticulturists as the Applegate wine industry continues to come of age. The vineyard, tasting room, and organic garden are all run by women. "It is the people who make this place so special," says Mini. She sees enormous potential to create some of the best wines in the world biodynamically. In spite of her early success, Mini believes it is important to stay humble, be eager to learn, and have a strong sense of perseverance. Mini is confident that one day her role as a female groundbreaker in the wine industry will be the norm, not the anomaly. She says it just takes courage, passion, patience, and tenacity—oh, and great wines!

Carla David of Wild Wines has been planting the way since 2007. She incorporates the fruit and aromas of organic local ingredients, creating exquisite small-batch boutique wines that celebrate the Applegate. Carla says much of her success is due to the camaraderie of our wine-growing community and adds, "I've always been able to borrow a missing fitting or get help running lab tests, moving pallets of glass, or even discussing options to tasting-room conundrums." In 2012, Carla received a USDA rural farm grant, enabling her to scale her business from 275 to 600 cases per year. "Fermentation over the centuries has primarily been a woman's job," Carla said, "so it seems fitting to see a rise of women in wine. It would essentially



Mini Banks hard at work during harvest at Cowhorn.

be a return to form, as women around the world historically brewed alcohol with grains, herbs, honey, and fruits. There's really no reason more women can't and won't influence the industry."

Ashley Bradfield wears many hats: tending vines at Electric Gardens, restoring health and vitality to numerous small vineyards, producing her first private-label tempranillo, and serving as outreach manager for Women in Wine. Ashley describes the Applegate as a supportive, close-knit community that pushes each other to be better and helps one another achieve that goal. Ashley attended the recent Women in Wine Oregon



Carla David pouring one of her boutique "Wild Wines" in her Little Applegate tasting room.

Conference where more than 200 women (and some men!) gathered to celebrate, empower, and educate each other. It left her feeling deeply hopeful about the future of women in wine.

RiverCrest Ranch, another boutique vineyard, has produced fruit for Quady North for 10 years and was recently awarded a rural farm grant enabling Cathy Rodgers (moi!) to bottle, for the first time, a custom-crush private label. RiverCrest Ranch is sustainably farmed and has achieved USDA organic, LIVE (Low Input Viticulture and Enology), and salmon-safe certification. I am excited about launching the RiverCrest label featuring wines from the 2021 harvest and will donate 10 percent of profits to local organizations.

Here in the Applegate Valley the women are *crushing it!*

Cathy Rodgers
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Cathy Rodgers of RiverCrest Ranch with her grandson, Ronin.

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