

Grape Talk: Grafting and creating custom grapevines



BY DEBBIE TOLLEFSON

Grafting has come up in my previous interviews with vineyard developers and wine makers so I decided to search for a vineyard nurseryman in order to shed some light on how grafting is used and where vineyard grafting started.

I interviewed Joe Ginnet of Plaisance Ranch, who has lived in the Applegate Valley all his life. In the 1890s, Joe's grandfather emigrated to the United States from Savoie, France, where the family was already vineyard nurserymen and wine grape growers. Joe's grandfather ended up in Jacksonville and planted grapes on Sterling Creek before Joe's father was born. But Joe studied animal husbandry at the University of California, Davis, not grapes. He got back to his grape roots only when one of his French cousins came for a visit in the 1990s.

Joe began growing grapevines and transitioning from the dairy business in the early 2000s. He learned everything he could about growing grapes and developing grape stock. Joe explained that he set out to learn everything about grafting and its uses in order to create custom vines and disease-resistant rootstock.

His French cousin continued to visit Joe yearly, helping Joe with his journey to

certified vineyard nurseryman.

Origins of grafting

Joe explained that grafting came about because French vines during the mid 19th century were infected by a root-destroying insect similar to an aphid. It was traced back to the eastern United States and probably arrived in France in packing material. Phylloxera, the soil-transmitted disease, was and is deadly to a vineyard. They found by accident that the rootstock of American vines was resistant to the soilborne phylloxera, so the French experimented by grafting American rootstock to European varieties, and developed a phylloxera-resistant plant.

According to Joe, grafting allows vineyard nurserymen to develop clones that resist disease, bear larger or smaller fruit, have shorter or longer fruit maturation rates, and are compatible with various types of soil. Grafting allows for all kinds of custom variations on the original *vitis vinifera* (common grapevine).

Joe showed me his very efficient grafting machine that creates the cuts to develop the perfect grafted rootstock for planting. He also had bins and bins of rootstock and uber rootstock (about three feet in length) waiting in his covered barn

to be planted in the spring.

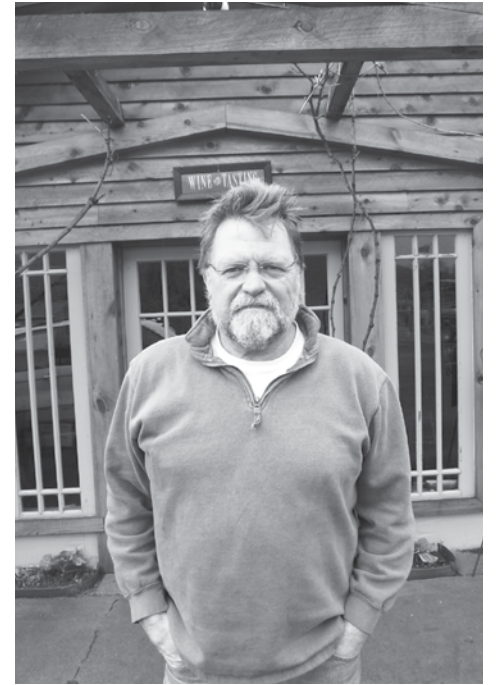
Grafting can also be used for economic reasons. Field grafting is a way for a grower to change a varietal by grafting a new varietal (scion) onto his healthy rootstock. For example, if there is a demand for viognier grapes, you can graft a viognier varietal (scion) onto your healthy merlot rootstock; in much less time (one year), you will have a producing viognier vineyard where a merlot vineyard once grew. This kind of grafting requires a trained grafter who works with portable equipment, field-preparing and then grafting and sealing the grafts. Not an easy task, but easier than having to start over with new plants.

New grape clones and varieties

Joe and his cousins in France have collaborated on creating grape clones and varieties that are new to southern Oregon, including mondeuse, whose "mother vine" came from Joe's family vines in the Savoie area of France. These vines must be quarantined for a number of years to ensure that none of the many French vine diseases travel with them to American soil. The vines for planting a vineyard are expensive and the process labor-intensive, so it is important to work with a certified nurseryman to get disease-free plants for planting. There are many soilborne and airborne diseases ready to wipe out a vineyard, and grafting is one way to protect our valley's most important crop.

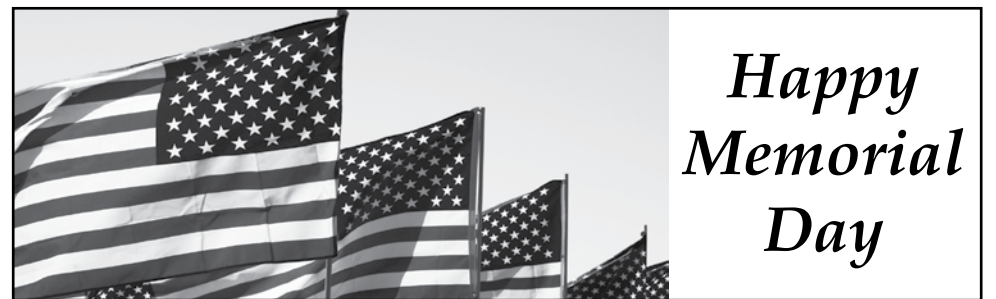
Plaisance Ranch tasting room is open daily at 16955 Water Gap Road, Williams, OR 97544. Phone: 541-846-7175.

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Top photo: Joe Ginnet of Plaisance Ranch winery. Bottom photo: Healthy rootstock to be planted in spring.

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