

Oregon wine growing rapidly on shoulders of increasing acreage, high quality production

by Aimee Lyn Brown

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Oregon's wine grape industry is booming due in part to the growing number of new vineyards and wineries popping up across the state.

According to a new report on selected Oregon commodities, wine grape crops posted gross sales of \$46.7 million last year, an increase of 27.6 percent since 2005. Increases in harvested acreage and improved yields due to better growing practices, management and seasonal conditions resulted in a 25.6 percent increase in wine grape production.

In southern Oregon's Umpqua Valley region, one of the most rapidly growing wine regions in the state, wine industry sales have increased between 15-20 percent per year during the last three years, said Steve Renquist, an Oregon State University horticulturist. Much of the growth can be attributed to an influx of new grape growers into the region and a growing market awareness of Oregon wines.

There are a lot of people, often retired from other industries, moving into the area, building homes and starting vineyards, said Renquist. "They're bringing a lot of energy and new ideas. The enthusiasm coupled with the experience of the established growers is pushing the industry to grow better more consistent grapes resulting in some great wine."

The number of wineries in the state has tripled in the last decade, and last year alone 49 new wineries opened their doors. Today, there are more than 300 wineries across the state producing wine from 72 unique varieties of grape. Most of these are small operations, producing about 5,000 cases a year, according to the Oregon Wine Industry.

Oregon has 15 approved wine growing regions, most of which are in the mid and southern Willamette Valley, where the mild Mediterranean climate creates conditions ideal for growing Oregon's signature wine, Pinot noir.

According to the Oregon Agricultural Estimates for Selected Commodities, wine grape growers harvested 13,381 acres in 2006, and of those about 9,000 were Pinot noir.

"The release of Sideways in 2004, opened the eyes of wine enthusiasts to Pinot noir," said James Kennedy, a wine chemist in OSU's College of Agricultural Sciences. "Before the movie, Pinot had a small following of loyalists. The exposure from Hollywood has made it the it wine of the moment and Oregon growers are responding with some amazing wines."

When done right, Pinot noir is a well-balanced gorgeous red wine filled with complex flavors of berries and earth. Its well-structured yet silky texture and long finish makes Pinot noir a varietal of true distinction.

"To compete on a global level, our focus must be on premium wines, and if you don't have good fruit you won't have good wine," said Kennedy. "We're looking at how to produce consistently awesome fruit. For Pinot noir, one more day on the vine can have a dramatic impact on the ripeness of the skins and seeds that are imperative for rich flavor and balanced tannins."

Tannins contribute to the color stability, astringency and bitterness of wines. This combination of factors is critically important to the age-worthiness and texture of wines, said Kennedy.

Oregon's cool climate, which favors the Pinot noir grape, presents some challenges for wine growers striving to produce ripe well-balanced tannins. The fall rains may come before the grapes have a chance to fully mature, and the harvest may be moved up to save the crop. This can result in under ripe fruit that produces a sub par wine.

"Oregon is still an industry in its youth and we're going to experience some growing pains," said Kennedy, an industry leader on the role of tannins in wine. "When the year is favorable and the good is good, it's phenomenal; when it's bad it's a wash."

Global climate change has the potential to create new markets for Oregon wine grape growers. The climate may become more California like, and growers are already beginning to introduce a range of varietals suited to warmer climate. Coupled with the state's role as a global leader in sustainable vineyard management, increases in diversification will likely result in the industries continued growth, said Kennedy.

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