



Cherries,
blackberries,
strawberries,
grapes flavor

Oregon's best backcountry brew



Candlelight, french bread, imported cheese, a tin of Russian caviar. A bottle of expensive red wine from — Amity, Oregon?

Only if you want to make a really good impression.

Otherwise you might settle for its cheaper California counterpart.

While the grape vines of Napa and Mendocino counties enjoy national popularity, a burgeoning wine industry in Oregon cannot

be slighted. Especially if price is any indication.

A 10-ounce bottle of White Reisling (a dry white wine) made at the Hillcrest Vineyard in Roseburg can go for as much as \$19. A bottle of the same wine bearing a California label can be had for under \$5.

The same price distinctions — though perhaps not quite as drastic — hold true for wines made in Amity, Dundee and even Lane County.

Home bottling yields low-budget fine wine

In another month, the blackberries will be everywhere.

They will hang in a lush tangle along the Willamette, threaten cyclists along the bike paths and tempt drivers along county roads.

And Brad Visgatis will be busy making wine.

In late August, when the berries are blackest and plumpest, Visgatis visits his favorite bushes, located in various places around Eugene. He spends the better part of an afternoon plucking about 15 pounds of the sweet, juicy fruit.

Then he heads home to begin the process of turning his harvest into his favorite drink — red wine.

On a coffee table in Visgatis' livingroom is a tall, green bottle of wine from his favorite batch. He sips the dark, red liquid from a wineglass.

"The taste most resembles a French Bordeaux," Visgatis says about his homemade blackberry wine. "It's very dry — I prefer a drier wine."

As he says this he twirls the glass and stares at the contents.

"I try to duplicate the expensive French wines," he says, with no sound of boasting in his voice. "That's why I'm very pleased with this particular batch."

The wine is good. The flavor is strong, but it is not juicy. The taste is accented with a hint of blackberry, but it is subtle and one has to search for it.

Visgatis began making his own wine after traveling to Europe and sampling the products of each country. French wine pleased him most.

"What the U.S. needs is a cheap table wine," Visgatis says. "In France, you can spend 2 francs (about 50 cents) on a very decent bottle of wine. Here, it's at least a couple dollars a bottle."

So he started bottling his own. "I'm very low budget on this," Visgatis says bluntly. This particular batch cost him about \$10 to produce 20 bottles.

Visgatis says it costs between \$10 and \$20 to purchase the necessary initial equipment, depending on the innovativeness of the winemaker. Picking the fruit instead of buying it, using recycled materials — such as the plastic tubs restaurants often throw away — and using old

wine bottles helps to cut costs.

Other necessary equipment includes a hydrometer to test the alcohol content, a coiled plastic tube called a "fermentation lock" that shows the speed of fermentation, and some rubber hosing for siphoning the wine.

Visgatis begins the process by mashing the fruit and saving the juice. After adding sugar and a few chemical stabilizers, he seals the liquid in a 5-gallon glass bottle to begin the primary fermentation stage.

When all the sugar is used up (transformed into alcohol), Visgatis bottles the wine for the secondary fermentation stage.

"I complicate matters because I add sugar at different stages to increase the alcohol content," Visgatis says. The alcohol content of his wine is generally much higher than the 11 percent found in most commercial wines.

At 11 percent, the wine "is not very stable," he says, and easily may turn to vinegar.

Once bottled, the only way to tell if the wine is ready is to sample it. Visgatis says this usually is the most rewarding part of the process.

A few years ago Visgatis made 16 bottles of strawberry wine as an experiment with different fruits. With the help of some friends, he managed to finish off the entire batch before it actually was "ready" to drink.

The danger of prematurely opening a bottle of wine such as blackberry or strawberry is that the wine will retain too much of the fruit flavor.

However, some people may like it that way, Visgatis says.

"And if you fail, don't worry about it," he says. Although the process is fairly simple, any number of things can go wrong during the fermentation stages.

The wine can get too warm or too cold and upset the process, he says, or contaminants can ruin the whole batch.

"You really have to taste a lot of wines to know when the wine is ready to drink."

Finishing his glass and setting it down, Visgatis allows himself a look of satisfaction.

"Yes. It's always a good feeling to be able to say, 'this is my wine — I made it.'"

Roberta Porter, owner of Porter Foods Unlimited and an expert on imported and domestic wines, is diplomatic on the question of which is better.

"That's everybody's decision," she says, but only after mentioning a gold medal won by an Oregon vineyard at a Paris wine-tasting. In 1975 Eyrie Vineyard of Dundee Oregon produced a Pinot-Noir that apparently stole the discerning tongues of a panel of European judges during a worldwide competition.

"You really can't compare Oregon to California," says Porter, whose store carries a large selection of domestic and imported wines.

"Their grapes ripen faster. The soil isn't as wet. There are a lot of variables."

Part of the reason for the growing number of successful Oregon wineries can be attributed to a general increase in wine consumption.

This is a national trend — and Oregon is no exception, Porter says.

"More younger people are drinking wine," she says, and white wines are the most popular among them. Young people like the taste of the sweeter, fruitier wines, she adds.

"After they've had some experience, they like drier wines."

Currently, hard liquor outsells wine, with vodka the best-selling hard alcoholic beverage in the United States. However, Porter says wine sales are increasing while sales of hard liquor have leveled off.

Are Oregonians following the national trend?

"In Eastern Oregon, it's mostly scotch and bourbon drinkers," Porter says. "Or conservative ranch beer types."

But the taste for wine in the rest of the state "is growing, I suppose," she says.

Winemaking at home is growing as well, Porter says. In fact, her store sells more wine ingredients and paraphernalia than the drink itself.

Although homemade beer is more popular than homemade wine, Porter says her customers claim the wine they make is often better — and always cheaper — than what she sells.

"A lot of kids make it and drink it the next week, which is a mistake. If you can hide a bottle from yourself for a year, you'll find out how good it really tastes."

However, Porter admits that not all the homemade wines she has sampled were successful.

"I've tasted some pretty horrid stuff," she says.

Although some Oregon wines have made it as far as France, most will not make it past the state line. Little or no wines are exported from Oregon, Porter says, but that may be only temporary.

Most vineyards in Lane County are less than five years old and "are just getting started," she says. The vines haven't fully matured and the wineries haven't reached the point where they are producing enough wine to sell it outside the state.

"There's simply not enough volume to go very far."

The oldest commercial winery in Oregon is the Hillcrest Vineyard, which opened seven years ago. One of the newest is Eugene's own Hinman Vineyard on Briggs Hill Road. Hinman may harvest its first crop of wine grapes this year, but it will be a few years before they are producing wine in quantity.

Other Lane County wineries include the Forgeron Vineyard in Elmira, the Honeyhouse Winery, also in Elmira and the Alpine Vineyard in Monroe.

Stories by Harry Esteve
Photos by Bill Wack



Gedreann Janni considers taking home a bottle of Oregon wine from Porter's Foods Unlimited, a Eugene store that carries a large selection of locally-made wines.