

Good soil, hard work, blossom into...

It is early autumn, after the turn of the 21st century in Oregon.

Endless rows of grapevines laden with swollen, ripe fruit march across the hundred valleys of the Umpqua. Pregnant with vineyards, the southern Willamette Valley has a tasting room around every turn in the road.

Vintners from the classic wine regions of Europe — Bordeaux, Champagne, Alsace, the Rheingau, Tuscany — have reluctantly admitted a number of Oregonians to their select club. Wine drinkers worldwide rate a Zinfandel from Napa Valley and a Pinot Noir from northern Oregon as toss-ups. Hillcrest Vineyard makes a sparkling wine that rivals the champagne of Moët et Chandon. A connoisseur of wines has trouble distinguishing between the Cabernet Sauvignons produced by the leading wine artists of Bordeaux, Sonoma, and the Umpqua Valley.

Perhaps the scenario is unlikely. But impossible?
Non, mon ami.

Oregon's *nouveau* wine industry is expanding *plus vite*, with fertile prospects for the future. Conditions are right in some regions; land is available, the market for the fruit of the vine is burgeoning.

But the people who dream of owning a vineyard are prepared for a long haul. The ones who look for quick returns are barking up the wrong vine, warn those who know.

"The normal farming mentality is an annual crop," says Dino DeNino, one of the grape growers and winemakers at Hillcrest Winery. "If you're gonna grow grapes, you gotta change your thinking and be prepared to wait."

"You shouldn't plan on planting any amount of acreage and living off it for the next ten years," says Phil Gale, also of Hillcrest. But the delay doesn't dishearten Gale, who takes a long view of the possibilities, and has invested in a vineyard of his own.

"If you just wanted to plant a couple acres of grapes and had some kids to help you," Gale says, "you could do it on the side."

"You get the grapes either by buying the cuttings or working for them. You need a tractor. You need to keep the deer off them. You gotta have the skills of a gardener or a farmer. You can't be an absentee owner. The only way to grow grapes is in your backyard, whether it's an acre or 40 acres. Every year is different in the wine business. The weather and the pickers vary. You gotta flow with it. You gotta stay there and be permanent to do the grapes justice."

Doyle Hinman, 40, proprietor of Hinman Vineyards southwest of Eugene, planted his first grapes in 1972, and pressed his first wine in 1979. He worked as a high school teacher in Eugene while his 10 planted acres matured.

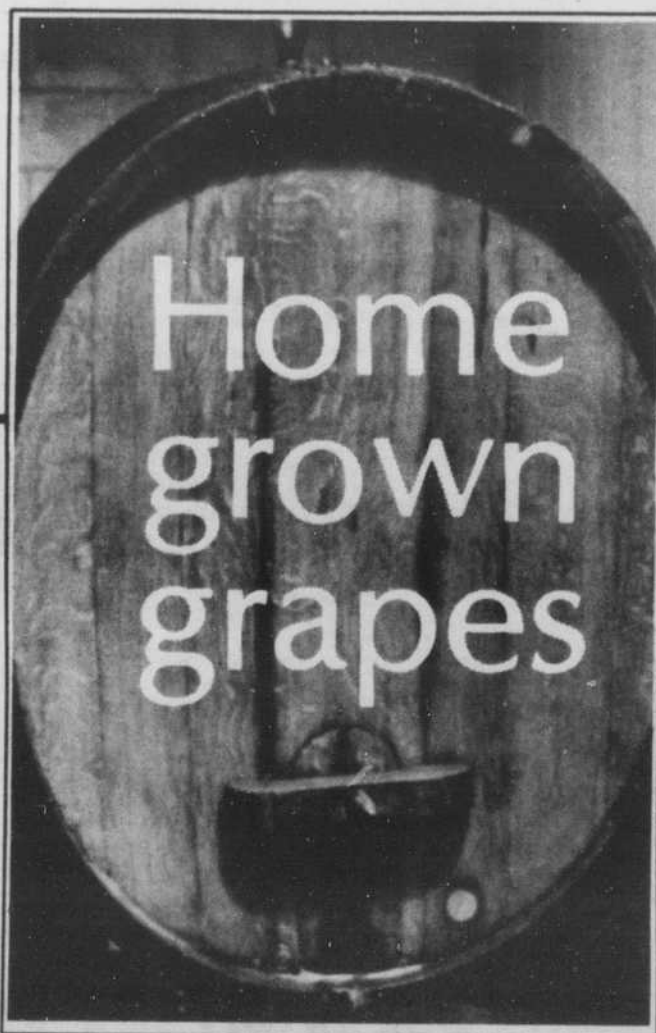
"I had the opportunity to get started because I had a job and didn't have to pay for labor," he says. "It's a lot more work than what I thought it would be."

Hinman cautions those who might try to farm wine grapes on a small scale.

"The smaller you do your acreage, the more expensive it is per acre, and the less return you get on your investment."

Story by Randy Malat

Photos by Jay Jollon



Developing a vineyard costs \$7,000 per acre, he estimates, including the price of the land. That's before building a winery.

Whether a person builds a winery or not, he can still make money just growing grapes, DeNino says.

Hinman got about 3½ tons per acre last year in an off year. Henry Winery, on highly fertile soil by the Umpqua River, got upwards of 10. The current agricultural market price for grapes is approximately \$750 a ton.

DeNino, Hinman, and others foresee an ample market for grapes in the coming years.

Now clearing a piece of land for a vineyard a few miles northwest of the Fern Ridge Reservoir is Gary Carpenter, 42, a retired Marine pilot.

"It took a long time to find the right southern exposure," Carpenter says. "You also need the right elevation — between 300 and 1,000 feet. You need two feet of topsoil, but it doesn't have to be that good. The con-



"It's a lot more work than I thought it would be," says Doyle Hinman, founder and proprietor of Hinman Vineyards, southwest of Eugene.

Dreaming of owning your own vineyard? If you expect quick returns, you're barking up the wrong vine

ventional wisdom says that you shouldn't grow grapes in too good of soil. The grapes do better under stress conditions."

Once the grower owns proper land, he or she needs stock. Carpenter, Jack Healy, and Paul Simonds, who are planting adjacent vineyards on idyllic spreads amid forests of fir and oak trees, bought 14,500 unrooted cuttings from Alpine Vineyards, at 10 cents a cutting. Planted in nursery rows to grow roots, the incipient vines await transplanting next spring.

Healy, 56, has just finished teaching geography at the University of Hawaii, and is starting a second career. He bought 40 acres, and figures to plant about 25. He envisions a home atop the ridge and a co-op winery with Carpenter.

Like most vineyards, Healy's comes with the quiet of nature and a long view.

He says he anticipates "a pleasant lifestyle. It's a lot of hard work, but at least you get to run your own show." Starting from scratch, Healy will plow the land, bring in a road and electricity, drill a well, build a fence, and wait for the vines to mature.

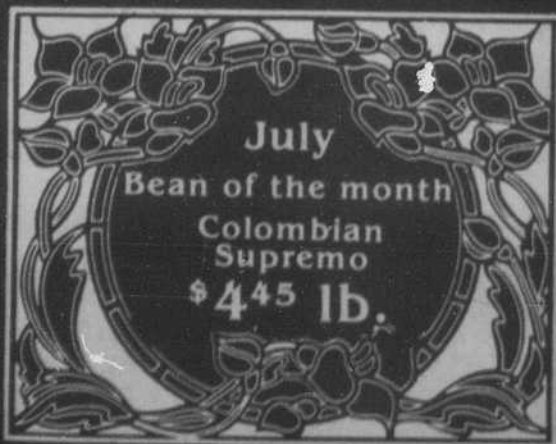
Wine growers say a person can farm 20 acres pretty much on his or her own, with help during planting, harvesting, and pruning in the winter. Lee and Linda Smith of Forgeron Vineyards in Elmira have cultivated their 20 acres practically by themselves. Like other grape farmers, they talk about the "sweat equity" they've invested as a way of keeping costs down.

DeNino is sitting pretty on a newly acquired 30-acre spread a third of a mile away from the confluence of the North and South Umpqua Rivers. The conditions replicate those of Bordeaux, he says.

DeNino talks about producing wines ranging from inexpensive jug wines to a fine Cabernet Sauvignon. He says he's looking at 1990 for "the big garbanzo."

DeNino's winery is going to be called Umpqua Rivers Winery. The winemaking world will be watching as DeNino's vines and Oregon's wine industry come of age.

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