

Local wineries capturing nation's attention, offering unique blends

By Cathy Peterson
Emerald Reporter

Oregonians drank 7.5 million gallons of wine in 1989, according to an Oregon Liquor Control Commission report. That's almost three gallons for every person in the state.

And Oregon wineries are keeping up with the demand, producing almost 780,000 gallons of dessert and table wine in 1989, nearly triple the amount produced in 1980.

Oregon wines caught the country's attention in 1983 when several wineries released pinot noirs of as good a quality as California or European wines. Since then, wineries have experimented with pinot grapes, as well as other grapes to produce wines of national reputation.

Local wine fans have the happy predicament of shopping for their wines at Oregon's best wine store, or tasting their wines at one of the third largest wineries in the state, both within 15 minutes of downtown Eugene.

"We sell an incredible amount of Oregon wines," said Gavin McComas, owner of Sundance Natural Foods. In 1989, Sundance was named the best wine retailer in the state of Oregon by wine industry members.

Sundance's wine selection once filled a lone shelf above the bulk foods section, but has now become a \$400,000-a-year item for Sundance. By late September, McComas said he hopes to open a store just for wines at 2470 Alder St.

The new store will have a larger stock than the current 1,200 to 1,500 bottles available now, McComas said.

"Whites far outsell reds, and chardonnays are the number one wine, period," he said.

He said his prices range from a \$6 bottle of white table wine to a \$299.95 bottle of Madiera wine pressed in 1875. Oregon wines make up 20 percent of the stock at Sundance, he said.

There are 84 licensed and bonded wineries in Oregon, ranging from cottage operations located in private homes, such as Oregon Estates Winery in Selma, to the largest producing winery in Oregon, Knudsen Erath in Dundee.

Most of the wineries produce their wines for

consumption in Oregon or the Northwest. Several of the larger wineries such as Hinman have looked into marketing in other regions of the country, but most of their wine still ends up on Oregon tables, said Hinman bookkeeper Wanda Smith.

One of the reasons Oregon produces good wines may be its climate, which is similar to the premium growing regions in France, McComas said. Oregon is able to produce wines California can't, because of its climate. Unfortunately the climate here is less consistent than California's, he said. But, "when we hit, we hit something really fine."

The state is divided up into grape-growing, or viticultural regions. Lane County falls into the South Willamette grape growing region, which spans the area from Albany to Eugene.

There are 11 vineyards in the region, including the award-winning Springhill Cellars/Meridian Vintners, which received the Oregon Governor's Cup for their wines in 1989, said Mike Dilley, South Willamette chapter spokesman.

Dilley said the award was a sign of excellence and a coup for the chapter, which must compete for the award with the larger or older wineries in Northern Oregon.

Wine drinkers who can't decide between red and white, or sweet or dry, can visit several local wineries which offer tastings and tours.

Established in 1972, Forgeron Vineyards in Elmira specializes in pinot noirs, cabernet sauvignons, chardonnays and white rieslings, as well as a limited amount of rare pinot gris, a blush-colored wine.

Tasting-room host Laura Magnuson said most of the wine made at Forgeron is consumed by Oregon drinkers. In 1989, the winery produced 12,000 cases of wine, made mostly from their own grapes.

Magnuson said the riesling is the best-selling wine, although the pinot gris is becoming popular as well.

Forgeron Vineyards is in Elmira off of Highway 126. The tasting room will be open 12 p.m. to 5

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