

It's all about the grapes for this Oregon winery

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

SILVERTON, Ore. — It's always been about the grapes for Chris Deckelman.

In 2003, when he was having trouble selling all the fruit from the 250 to 280 acres he either owns or manages, he and his wife, Sharon, and friends Bruce and Sally Eich started Vitis Ridge Winery. They started in Deckelman's garage, where the two men had already been making wine for 20 years.

Focusing on unique wines and specialty blends, Vitis Ridge was soon producing 3,000 cases a year. The grapes come solely from the 100-acre Meridian Estate Vineyard and account for 4 to 5 percent of that fruit.

Bruce Eich is ready to retire from the winemaking business and Deckelman isn't sure where he'll go from here, but for starters he's moving the tasting room back home after subletting from Seven Brides Brewery the past several years — as long as he can get county approval. The rules changed a month before he applied.

"Once it's approved we're going to buy out Bruce and Sally and see where we go from there," Deckelman said. "It's kind of hard to stop."

Deckelman has been growing grapes for more than 30 years, starting with 10 acres in 1992. Most recently he planted 33 acres to hazelnuts.

In managing other area vineyards Deckelman does everything from planting the vines to selling the fruit, moving 900 to 1,000 tons of fruit, mainly Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris.

Being from the Burgundy family, these varieties are especially thin-skinned and he's had to deal with some sunburn this year.

"The crop is really happy



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press
Brian Deckelman, left, helps out his father, Chris Deckelman, at one of the vineyards he manages. Chris Deckelman cares for 250-280 acres of vineyards in the Silverton, Ore., area including his own 100-acre Meridian Estate Vineyard.



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Grapes ripen at the 90-acre vineyard of David Leonard near Silverton. Vineyard Manager Chris Deckelman said local crops look promising this year.

so we were able to drop some of the sunburned fruit and make our tonnage per acre," Deckelman said.

The way they're supported calls for yearly cane pruning, for which a machine has yet to be found.

"We're trying to mechanize everything — hedging,

leaf removal, harvest," he said, "but our style of pruning is just very labor intensive so we're stuck with that."

Among his biggest customers are King Estate Winery in Eugene, Willamette Valley Vineyard in Turner, Chateau Bianca in Dallas and Honeywood Winery in Salem.

Deckelman said the East Willamette Valley is gaining on the West Valley in terms of recognition for its wine and grapes.

"King Estate, Oregon's biggest producer, buys a large volume of Pinot Gris grapes from within about a 10-mile radius of Silverton," he said. "It's getting around that this is a really good region."

It was by a twist of fate that David Hill, a pioneer in the Oregon wine industry, chose the Dundee hills to open Eyrie Vineyards, where he made wine until his death in 2008.

"He originally wanted to plant out here in the Silverton hills but the price was too high; it was the late '70s-early '80s and a lot of it was in strawberries," Deckelman said. "So he went over to the west side of the Valley."

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