

Cody Wright: A 'new' winemaker in the Willamette Valley

By **BRETT TALLMAN**
For the Capital Press

DUNDEE, Ore. — There is a joke in the Oregon wine industry that it has taken Cody Wright a decade to become the “new” winemaker in the Willamette Valley.

In 2005, Wright started Purple Hands Winery in Dundee, Ore. That year he produced 250 cases of wine with an Oregon-grown blend. Just three years later, Purple Hands Holstein Vineyard Pinot Noir cracked the 90-point mark with a score of 92 from Wine Spectator. Wine lovers started to pay attention.

Two, in particular, took a

special interest. In 2012, Scott and Michele Campbell, of Portland, bought a 20 percent stake in Purple Hands. Their contribution allowed Wright to invest in a new winery and tasting room. In the three years since, the winery has tripled in value. Purple Hands now produces about 5,000 cases of wine a year and sources fruit from six vineyards in the Willamette Valley. Next spring, Wright will move his entire production to a new facility, now under construction, in downtown Dundee.

But Wright wants to maintain his steady, but productive pace.

“I could probably handle

up to 7,000 cases at the new facility,” he said. “It’s just my wife and I. During harvest we get help from tasting-room staff and from friends, but I think 5,500 is the magic number. I really want to focus on quality.”

So far, that approach is paying off. Purple Hands Stoller Vineyards Pinot Noir received a 93-point rating from Wine Spectator and is now one of the three highest-rated wines in Oregon from 2013. Wright is pleased with the positive criticism, but seems prouder of less tangible accomplishments. Last year Purple Hands made its first wine with the highly sought after grapes from Shae Vineyards.

“I’ve been working hard to get those grapes for a long time,” Wright said. “I’m honored to be part of the group that tries to show off that vineyard.”

The significance of that fruit might be lost on some, but Wright is steeped in Willamette Valley winemaking history.

“When Dick (Shea) called and said he had a block for me, he told me it was the back block — the oldest block,” Wright said, “which is the same block my dad worked with at Panther Creek.”

And there is the real first chapter in Cody Wright’s story. Before Purple Hands, he was Ken Wright’s kid. He is the son of one of the pioneers of the Oregon wine industry.

“I had a good head start because I’ve been making wine with my dad since I was 10 years old,” Wright said. “I grew up around the masters. A lot of this was understanding through osmosis.”

But Wright does not take his head start for granted.



Kali Ramey Martin/For the Capital Press

Winemaker Cody Wright is shown at his Purple Hands Winery. He is carrying on the tradition of a notable Oregon wine pioneer family.

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ters — laid the groundwork. Those guys made no money. They did it because they were passionate about Pinot Noir. Now Oregon Pinot Noir is an institution.”

So the joke is only partly true. It has taken Cody Wright a lifetime to become the “new” winemaker in the Willamette Valley. And he’s making the most of it.



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