

# Loeza

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"I don't have words to explain how I feel, and my family feels, to have a vineyard with our name," he says.

## Honoring the story

His is a familiar tale, and it is one Oregon agriculture, especially the wine industry, appears to be more comfortable in telling. At many farms and processing plants, of course, the work crews — the planters, pruners, pickers and packers — are heavily Latino. But in many cases they are also the managers, coordinating crews, planning work and carrying out a company's vision at ground level.

Oregon's vineyard and winery operators in particular have taken steps to support and acknowledge the workforce. For 25 years, the industry has funded ¡Salud! Services through Tuality Healthcare, which provides free medical screening and other services to seasonal vineyard workers and their families. Money comes from a two-day tasting and Pinot noir auction hosted by winemakers every November; the 2015 event raised \$800,000.

At the 2016 Oregon Wine Symposium this past winter, the industry for the first time gave out Vineyard Excellence Awards.

The winners were Jesse Lopez, of Celestina Vineyards in Southern Oregon; Irineo Magana, of Phelps Creek Vineyards in the Columbia River Gorge; and Efred Loeza, who began work at Tualatin Estate Vineyard in 1979 and stayed on when it was bought in 1997 by Willamette Valley Vineyards, based in Turner, Ore., outside Salem. Loeza manages all the company's vineyards up and down the valley, 498 acres of grapes.

Mark Gibbs, senior agronomist with Oregon Vineyard Supply in McMinnville, is pleased to see rising recognition of farmworkers' contributions, including his long-time friend, Loeza.

"He represents the backbone of our industry," Gibbs said. "Without folks like Efred Loeza and the others, we would not exist."

Over time, Latinos are increasingly becoming farmers themselves, not just laborers. The USDA's 2012 Census of Agriculture showed the number of Hispanic farmers reached nearly 100,000 nationwide, a 21 percent increase over 2007. Two-thirds of them were principal operators, also a 21 percent increase over the previous census.

The change comes as the U.S. is having what Jim Bernau, Willamette Valley Vineyards founder and CEO, describes as a "strong discussion" about immigration.

Bernau said experts in demographics believe a country's long-term success depends on the level of upward mobility it provides immigrants. He considers Loeza



Efred Loeza takes a call in his vineyard office. From his beginning as a teenage laborer who had entered the country illegally and spoke no English, he's risen over 37 years to manage more than 300 acres of wine grapes for Willamette Valley Vineyards, one of Oregon's distinguished operations.

Photos by Eric Mortenson/Capital Press



In an emotional moment outside Gaston, Ore., Efred Loeza plants the first vine, a Pinot gris, in what will be known as the Loeza Vineyard. Loeza manages more than 300 acres of wine grapes for Willamette Valley Vineyards, and the company wanted to honor him and his extended family.

and others "one of those great American immigrant success stories."

"Those people in the future will not only have their hands on the clippers and on the tractor steering wheel," he said, "but on the levers of the major business decisions."

## A stick in the ground

Efred Loeza crossed the border illegally when he was 17, accompanying his father, who had called upon him to work the crops, make money, and help support the family. Efred cried when they left home in the Mexican state of Michoacan, because he wanted to stay in school and work locally.

"No, I need help bringing more money to the house," his father answered. "That's my last word."

Loeza and his father arrived at a labor camp in Cornelius, Ore., on April 15, 1979. Efred spoke no English and didn't know where he was; on the long trip north he'd peppered his father with questions about where they would stay and how they would eat.

The first spring and summer they picked strawberries, cucumbers and blackberries, and traveled into Washington to work the apple crop. They returned to join the crew at Bill Fuller's Tualatin Estate Vineyard near Forest Grove,



A freshly-planted Pinot gris vine takes in the sunshine at Loeza Vineyard near Gaston, Ore. The new vineyard is named for Efred Loeza and his family. Loeza, who started as a teenage laborer 37 years ago, today oversees more than 300 acres of grapes for Willamette Valley Vineyards.

pruning and training vines. Efred was fascinated by the realization that you could put what looked like a stick into the ground and it would turn into grapes.

In 1981 he was arrested for driving with a suspended license, spent a week in jail and was sent back to Mexico when his illegal status was discovered. The judge told him he could return when he fixed his papers. The vineyard owner, Fuller, held a job open for him and rehired him when he returned. He eventually became a U.S. citizen.

The vineyard manager, the late David Foster, was fluent in Spanish and had taken a liking to the inquisitive teenager.

"You can work for us for 20 years," he told Loeza at one point.

"Well, I like to learn," Efred replied. "If I'm going to stay here 20 years, I want to know what I'm doing."

He began a journal, taking notes on what he did every day in the vineyard. At one point, he showed it to Foster.

"You know what," the manager said, "one day you're going to be the main person here."

Gibbs, the Oregon Vineyard agronomist, said Loeza

often approached him with fertilizer, pest and plant disease questions. "He'd bring me a shoot and say, 'Mark, what's this?'"

"He impressed me as a person who wanted to learn to better himself and his family," Gibbs said. "Ultimately, he's a real success story."

In 1984 Loeza moved to a job in the winery, and spent the next 16 years learning all aspects of making wine in addition to doing vineyard work. Fuller, the owner, taught him to taste the complex notes in wine.

Over time, Loeza's parents and all but one of his 10 brothers and sisters joined him in Oregon or moved from Mexico to California. Many of them worked at the vineyard; his younger brother, Miguel, has worked with him since 1981.

In 2000, three years after Willamette Valley Vineyards bought the business from Fuller, new owner Bernau sat down with Loeza and told him he had a new job: vineyard manager.

"You guys chose the wrong person," Loeza said he responded. "I only went to school seven years."

"Why don't you try it for one year?" Bernau suggested. After one year passed, Bernau

said he should try it for another. Loeza has been there ever since.

Loeza said the difference between taking instructions and making his own decisions at the vineyard nearly overwhelmed him. It helped that he was able to consult his management notes, kept in journals that date to 1982.

"The first year, I don't know how I survived," he said.

But Bernau had confidence in him.

"He knows what he's doing and he knows it well," he said. "He's a very hands-on leader. He treats people well and is respectful to them."

"He has a high level of emotional intelligence," Bernau said. "He knows how to identify talent and motivate talent in a very effective way, a very productive way."

He said Loeza is able to grow high-quality fruit within the company's framework of costs and prices, while fending off the challenges of weather.

"It's a very challenging business and you really need remarkable talent to be successful in it," Bernau said. "Why is Willamette Valley Vineyards so successful? One of the answers is Efred Loeza."

Loeza and his wife, Herminia, live in what used to be Bill Fuller's house on the company's Tualatin Estate vineyard near Forest Grove, and three of his four children grew up there. His father, Marcos, died of heart failure in the house in 2005 after celebrating Efred's birthday. Every Saturday, the extended family gathers at his mother's house in Cornelius to eat and enjoy each other's company.

Bernau intended to plant only Pinot gris on the company's new vineyard near Gaston. When he told Efred the vineyard would be named after the family, however, Loeza insisted it had to have some Pinot noir as well. The complex and nuanced flavor of Pinot noir make it Loeza's favorite, in part because it's also a challenge to grow from that stick in the ground.

Bernau didn't argue.

"One of my great joys," he said, "is seeing Efred and his family arise."



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