

Queen of the vine: Betty O'Brien

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

The daughter of an Oregon farmer, one might think that growing grapes was among Betty O'Brien's first choices in careers. The owner of Elton Vineyard in the Eola Hills of Western Oregon laughs at the suggestion.

"I always said I would never work on a farm again, and here I am," she said.

What changed her mind? The romance of wine, of course.

Betty and her late husband, Dick, were floating down the Rhine River early in their half-century marriage. Drifting by the romantic hillsides blanketed with winegrapes, an idea was born. Perhaps they could grow a few grapes on her parents' (Elton and Peggy Ingram) property. In 1983, when they planted the first 5 acres, much of her family's 500 acres was in blackcaps, North America's indigenous black raspberry. Her father had purchased the then-marginal hillside farmland in the 1950s. "He got a great buy," said Betty.

The couple planted the first 5 acres of grapes, and then



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Betty O'Brien, owner of Elton Vineyard, relaxes in her extensive gardens with her dog, Gamgee.

more, as they could afford it. By 2002, when she and her brother inherited the property, the O'Briens had planted 60 acres of grapes. The grapes, it turns out, were planted on desirable Jory and Nekia soils.

In high demand, the Pinot noir, Pinot gris and other varietals grown on the Ingram farm have found their ways into the bottles of Ken Wright, Sylvan Ridge, Lange, Willamette Valley Vineyards and many other wines. O'Brien-grown Pinot

noirs have earned high praise from wine experts. Willamette Valley in 2007 struck a lease and purchase deal with Betty and more recently, her brother, Allan Ingram. Willamette Valley is making a big deal of the vineyard, this year creating the Elton label and attracting new investors to build a tasting room and winery adjacent to the vineyard.

In recognition of Betty's service, Jim Bernau, founder of Willamette Valley Vineyards,

established a scholarship at Chemeketa Community College's wine studies program in her name.

"It is wonderful to see what

these bright, young winemakers are doing with the vineyard the O'Briens planted so many years ago. It gives me great pleasure to assist in achieving their dreams," said Bernau.

Despite her declaration that farm work was too hard for her, Betty's list of activities as an advocate for Oregon wineries and winegrape growers is exhausting. Foremost: the O'Briens have dedicated half of their residual estate to Chemeketa's wine program, and the other half to support Oregon State University's Viticulture Extension agent.

In addition to that posthumous donation, she's on the board of directors of the Willamette Valley Vineyard. She's been the head of the Oregon Wine Board, a past president of the Oregon Winegrowers Association and a past president of the Eola-Amity Hills

Winegrowers Association. She's on Chemeketa's Foundation Board, and chairs its Wine Studies advisory committee. She's had her hand in many other nonprofits through the years, from Girl Scouts to Willamette Valley Hospice to local arts groups.

Her nearly 2-acre gardens below the vineyard are a popular location for exclusive nonprofit events. The pathways past water features, native and exotic flowers and trees and foliage are packed with an eclectic collection of sculptures, carvings, glass, brass and quiet nooks, where one can sit and enjoy a glass of wine. One of her favorite sculptures, Rick Gregg's "She Danced in the Garden All Day With Her Hat On," is featured on the label of the new Elton Winery bottles. More than 300 people turned out for the release party July 30.

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