

Center trains Northwest vintners

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

In the 1990s, a small group of vineyard and winery owners began a quest to develop a program that would help train workers for Oregon's burgeoning wine industry.

Today, with more than 900 vineyards, 545 wineries and 14,000 wine-related jobs in the state, that small group appears forward-thinking. Eighteen years ago, Chemeketa Community College established its Northwest Wine Studies Center in the Eola Hills west of Salem. Since then, its students and workshop attendees have learned everything from food and wine pairing to managing entire vineyard operations, according to Jessica Sandrock, Chemeketa's new director of wine studies and agricultural sciences.

Set at the edge of the eight-acre vineyard on Eola Hills' oak-forested south side, the Northwest Wine Studies Center offers students hands-on work in the vineyard and in



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Jessica Sandrock is the new director of Wine Studies at Chemeketa Community College, where students get hands-on training in the college's vineyard.

the on-site winery.

The program offers two associate degrees — one in winemaking and the other in vineyard management — and several certificates. Workshops — either for credit or for fun — are offered each term.

This fall, for example, the public and degree-seeking students can take wine appreciation, general viticulture and introduction to winemaking. Vineyard spraying and pruning workshops, some offered in Spanish, are also

part of the line-up, aimed at helping current vineyard owners keep workers' skills up to date.

The program has had an unexpected impact. In addition to training employees to work in established businesses, many of the program's students have used winemaking and vineyard skills to launch their own operations. At a recent annual awards celebration at the center, dozens

of wineries lined the hall offering samples of their latest vintages, all with connections to Chemeketa's program.

For example, Iraq war veterans Ben Martin and Ryan Mills of Dauntless Wine Co., completed the wine studies program and joined Paul Warmbier to found their new Gaston winery.

Some of the students joined the program with an aim to working with the win-

ery industry in the future. Danny Jaffer, the program's Student of the Year, said he intends to use his knowledge as a civic leader. He got the idea from Lowell Ford, one of the founders of the program. "Lowell said: 'Danny, if you really want to know something about the wine industry in this part of Oregon, you should take some classes in it at Chemeketa.' He was right."

Ford, owner of Illahe Vineyards, said in the 1990s he suggested teaching a vineyard management class at Chemeketa to meet the demand for training from new growers. The first class was so popular they had to cut off registration. More classes were offered, equally as popular.

"The college realized we had a winner in the program so we hired a full-time instructor in Al MacDonald and offered an associate degree. The wine studies program has grown way beyond what I ever dreamed possible," Ford said.

Vineyard skills can be developed in two ways: by completing the two-year vineyard management degree, or by completing the one-year vineyard operations certificate. Both tracks provide coursework and hands-on experience for vineyard workers, but the degree program adds additional science, math, management and elective courses that could include some winemaking and processing skills, based on the student's interests.

The winemaking degree provides technical training and background knowledge needed for winemaking in the Northwest. The winemaking program also provides on-the-job experience at local wineries.

For information about the program, call 503-399-5139, or visit the web page, www.chemeketa.edu/programs/winestudies/

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