

# Wineries thrive in Eastern Oregon

By **GEOFF PARKS**  
For the Capital Press

The tiny Eastern Oregon town of Echo — with all of 700 residents — boasts a full measure of resident wineries with the 2012 establishment of Echo Ridge Cellars at the southwestern edge of town.

Echo Ridge is the second winery — the other is Sno Road Winery, established in 2004 — to be sited in the old town, formerly a major stop on the old Oregon Trail in the mid-19th century.

In true Eastern Oregon style, the business is run by the hard work and pioneer vision of the Bales family.

Jay Bales, 59, retired from the construction industry in the Seattle area, moved with his wife, Kim, 55, and family to Echo after purchasing Flying B Vineyard in 2010. Sited between Umatilla River bottomland and the basalt cliffs of Alkali Canyon, the now-89-acre vineyard, mostly planted between 2006 and 2008, was added to and renamed Firethorn Vineyard.

The 11-acre property on which the 2,500-square-foot winemaking facilities and 400-square-foot tasting room are located once was a farm.

The property is on the main highway through Echo and is about a mile-and-a-half from the vineyard.

The Baleses took an 1945 lap-wood grain elevator on the property, converted it into the tasting room and features it on Echo Ridge's wine labels. Wine is made in the adjacent 1909-era building.

Thanks to the mid-2000s plantings by the former vineyard owner, "we were able to start producing wine our first year here," said Berlyn Bales, 30, Echo Ridge's co-owner, winery operations director and assistant winemaker.

"This last bottling we did over 2,000 cases," she said. "Typically for us, we're closer to 1,000 to 1,500 cases, so we're really small."

Echo Ridge Cellars is considered part of the

large Columbia Valley American Viticultural Area.

"We just replanted two acres of Cabernet Sauvignon four years ago so the newest ones are just coming on line now," Jay said. "We're trying to sell about 80 percent of our grapes. We've got plenty of fruit here, and it's a great product."

He said a long-term goal is to sell his grapes to wineries in areas such as the Willamette Valley in order to be true to the concept of an Oregon-specific identity for wines made from warm-climate grapes.

Taking some marketing risks may pay off in the short term for the winery. Echo Ridge for the first time this year produced 700 gallons of blended red wine in single-serve, to-go only, 8.4-oz. aluminum cans, labeling it "Rodeo Red."

"We just started selling them (in mid-June)," Berlyn said. Jay added that the family is "still trying to find a niche for the cans. We've got a lot of rodeos going on over here and cans are an easy, single-glass pour where somebody doesn't have to buy a whole bottle."

The 16 blocks of wine grapes were planted into a top layer of loess soil, and they enjoy, the Baleses say, "free-draining soils and aspects suited to each clone."

The winery's current offerings consist of typical Bordeaux varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Merlot as well as Syrah and a red blend called Three Blondes and a Boy. Muscat Canelli white grapes are also utilized, and a small number of bottles of dessert wine called Arrete is produced from them.

A higher-end Bordeaux-style blend called Cinq Blocs is sourced from grapes from five of the vineyard's dedicated blocks of grapes. The first vintage of Cinq Blocs was from 2016's crop.

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Echo Ridge's co-owner



Geoff Parks/For the Capital Press  
**Kim, Berlyn and Jay Bales in the barrel room of their Echo Ridge Cellars in Echo, Ore.**

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V19-1/102

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V19-1/108