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Central Washington winery all about terroir

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

In 1998 Cox Canyon Vineyards was the first commercial vineyard planted in Kittitas County, Wash., and Ellensburg Canyon Winery was the 697th licensed winery in Washington.

Owner Gary Cox always had an interest in soils. He has a bachelor's degree from Southern Illinois University in plant and soil science, and a master's degree in agronomy and soils from Washington State University.

After working at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation for 34 years, Cox is now retired, devoting all his attention to his passion of utilizing sustainable practices.

All pruning materials are mulched back to the soil, facilitating water and nutrient uptake. In addition, "we use state-of-the-art precision irrigation technology (Regulated Deficit Irrigation), to stress the vines, resulting in intense fruit flavors," he said.

Regulated Deficit Irrigation involves restricting irrigation between fruit set and when the grapes begin to ripen to control shoot growth and influence grape quality.

Cox also worked as an instructor of agro-ecosystems at Yakima Valley College, teaching sustainability, terroir of Washington and agro-ecology. With his interest in soils, plants and wines, it was natural to combine his



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Kendall Kramer and Gary Cox at a farmers' market with their product on display. Gary Cox's 17-acre Cox Canyon Vineyard is in the northwest corner of the Columbia Valley AVA .

talents into growing grapes and making wines.

The Columbia Valley American Viticultural Area is Washington's largest grape-growing region. "The foothills of the Cascade Mountains form a unique microclimate along the western part of it," said Cox.

His 17-acre Cox Canyon Vineyard has 7 acres in production. This includes 5 acres of 21-year-old wine grapes — 3 acres of Cabernet Franc, 1.4 acres of Riesling and .6 acres of Malbec.

"The vines planted in 1998 provide a 500-case-per-year production," said Cox.

"This is a beautiful

west-sloping site at the entrance to the Wild and Scenic Yakima River Canyon. Volcanic ash deposited in layers from early eruptions of Mt. Rainier, Adams and St. Helens provides valuable micronutrients in the soil," he said.

The elevation — 1,400 to 1,525 feet — is higher than other Yakima Valley vineyards, he said.

This provides good air flow, and daily temperature fluctuations of 50 degrees, which develop flavinoids in the grapes. Flavinoids in fruits and vegetables have dietary health benefits as powerful antioxidants that aid the immune system.

"Our vineyard is committed to the concept of terroir, the French term to define the many conditions which make each vineyard site unique within a growing region," said Cox.

"This particular terroir ripens late, producing low yields (2.5 tons/acre) with small grape size, deep color and great concentration of fruit flavors," he said.

"Temperatures here may be 3-5 degrees cooler on average, but increased hours of sunlight (from a more northerly latitude) during mid-season provide optimal conditions for intensely flavored fruit," he said.