



Standing watch over **Kramer Vineyards'** winery is a suit of armor affectionately known as Bob. Bob the Knight. Judging from the size of the armor I would say that, in his prime, Bob went about 6 feet and around 105 pounds and couldn't have cut a round of warm brie, let alone skewer some invading marauder with his paper thin sword. Undaunted, this medieval scarecrow, sporting a healthy coating of Rustoleum, tends to his duty at the entrance of one of Oregon's more carefree, quirky and high quality wineries. I hope some of you took my recommendation from last month and managed to get yourselves out to Washington County on April 9th or 10th for the Weird Food Festival at Kramer.

The Chardonnay Lovers' Weekend and Weird Food Festival was one of many reasons I wanted to visit and review Kramer. Kramer recently received excellent scores from the **Wine Spectator** for two of their Pinot noirs, and one of those took the Gold Medal at the even more recent **Newport Wine and Seafood Festival**. The snide comment on the IRS they had on their answering machine was the clincher. A winery that obtains distinction in the industry but can still laugh at the world and itself is the kind of place that I truly appreciate.

The winery is a little over three miles down Olson road, just south of downtown Gaston, and is owned by Trudy and Keith Kramer. Their 13 or so acres roll through a small sheltered area that looks out over a sea of cultivated trees. Kramer is a big small winery that produces about 3,500 cases a year. They only make about 100-380 cases of any particular variety. Trudy was, for years, the premier amateur wine maker in the state and no doubt numerous silver medal winners were happy to see her turn pro. The vineyard has been in place and slowly increasing in size since 1984. On Mother's Day 1990, Kramer opened its doors and began selling to the public.

The Weird Food Festival was a concept designed to enhance their Chardonnay Lovers' Weekend. Trudy says that many weird food items go well with Chardonnay, so for 4 years now they have been treating people to a small collection of common and not so common weird foods. This is just one of the many festivals that Kramer hosts to highlight their wine. In the 7+ months the tasting room is open each year, Kramer invites people to the Birthday bash featuring free cake and ice cream, "Match Made in Heaven" Memorial Day Weekend, Fathers' Day Festival, at which they have all six of their Pinot noirs from 1991 to '92 available for tasting; the big July 4th Weekend Verboort Sausage Festival featuring rabbit, buffalo and venison sausages fresh from the nearby town of Verboort; a Dessert Contest in August that you get to judge, and a Jazzy Labor Day weekend that may or may not have food depending on the local population of yellow jackets at the time.

The Weird Food Festival struck me as particularly interesting because some folks just get a little too uptight about which foods should be eaten with which wines. The chance to mix and match bizarre foods with a variety of wines was appealing. Some people, probably no one who reads this paper, would just faint dead away if they saw someone eating chicken with a red wine. Relax. I heartily believe in matching food and wine but have no problem with people making any type of combinations they want. Late Harvest Riesling with your steak? If that's what you like, more power to you. Just don't invite me over for dinner.

The foods were prepared by the Flying M Ranch in Yamhill and either cooked or reheated in the small kitchen at the winery. The emu kabob was easily the most interesting and tasty of the items they had. Emu are large flightless birds similar to the ostrich except that they are indigenous to Australia. I have never seen an emu and the only thing I know about them is that "emu" is an answer in every single crossword puzzle in existence, except for the one in the back of TV Guide. Not being much of a meat eater makes it hard for me to classify (no, it doesn't taste like or even resemble chicken), but sweet and sour duck seems to be the closest resemblance of taste and texture.

Also hailing from Australia were the bugs they had to offer. They were larvæ-like insects that burrow in the sands of the coastline Down Under. I think I would respect old Paul Hogan's manly portrayals more if he threw a few creepy crawlies on the barby rather than shrimp. I had been hoping for stuffed beetles, chocolate covered grasshoppers, deep fried praying mantis or something of that ilk; however, these bugs weren't bad. They resembled either larvæ or shrimp depending on how you wanted to prepare your stomach for them. Other snacks were more traditional in their weirdness: Frog legs, calamari and escargot.

True to their word the Kramers had laid out

every Chardonnay they had in the cellar back to 1989, their first vintage. If you get a chance to taste several vintages of any wine variety (I recommend Pinot noir, Pinot gris and Chardonnay as the best for this) from a single winery, I suggest you take the opportunity. Wine changes, hopefully for the better, as it sits in the bottle. Flavors become more distinct, acidic qualities mellow as the wine becomes more mature. With 4 years of Chardonnay available to taste it was interesting to see how the older wines compared to the more recent vintages. At most tastings there are generally only one or two types of each variety so you don't get a historical perspective of the winery. Working backwards, the sensation of sampling a smoother, more distinct wine each time was quite obvious. The trend of their Chardonnays aging well in the bottle bodes well for their other wines that do not extend as far back as 1989.

Not to be missed is Kramer's 1992 Pinot noir Reserve. Most years each winery will produce two or three different selections of a given variety and label them according to their quality. The Reserve wines are the wines that show the most promising characteristics early in the fermenting process. Kramer has produced an extraordinary example of Pinot noir with this reserve. It is a little on the spendy side by Oregon standards, \$22 a bottle; however, it is well worth the price if you know anything about Pinot noir. The wine is tremendously smooth with virtually no tannic quality at all. The flavors of raspberry and cherry on the finish of each taste are unmistakable. Quite possibly the best Pinot noir I have tasted this year. Interestingly it was rated behind their estate bottled Pinot, no slouch itself, by **The Wine Spectator**. Tastes in wine differ but having tasted these two beside each other it is hard to believe that there wasn't an error in judgement or typesetting by someone at the magazine.

Kramer also does several fruit wines. With only a handful of exceptions almost no Oregon wineries produce anything more than a token fruit wine or two. I am not a big fruit wine fan but I can appreciate the necessity of this variety in the market. Most places don't want to be seen as a fruit wine producer because they fear being categorized primarily as such, and consequently not have their other wines taken seriously. Kramer proves you can do both as long as you do them both well. Their fruit varieties are on only about 5% sugar so they are not syrupy sweet. The blackberry wine is excellent and the loganberry wine was eagerly snapped up by one of my tasting pals because of its quality and low price for this style of wine. He is looking to develop his own niche as something of a dessert wine connoisseur, feeling that there are fewer of those in captivity than there are North American Condors, and is always eager to pick up a bottle at the prices Kramer was offering.

Kramer's tasting room is a warm and welcoming place with very friendly people eager to talk to you about wine. As Oregon Wine Country becomes more well known, and being listed in April's edition of **Life Magazine** as one of America's 5 best new vacation spots certainly will not hurt, wineries that appeal not only to people's palates but to their personalities will be the ones to extend their name recognition and sales. It is amazing to me that some wineries really have not accepted this fact and incorporated it into the way that they run their business. Some wineries don't have tasting rooms, either because they are too small or because they have developed a market for their wines to the point where they don't need the extra business. That's fine, but over half of Oregon's wineries do have tasting rooms that are open for more than just a few days a year.

Tasting rooms are critical to the ongoing success of many of these wineries because the wine is sold at retail rather than wholesale to distributors. It also gives visitors a chance to taste many wines without having to pay before they know what they are getting. For a tasting room to be truly successful it needs to be staffed by friendly and knowledgeable people who can carry on conversations about wines as well as other topics with people from all walks of life. Few places in Oregon have established enough of a reputation for their wine that they can overlook the effort they put into their tasting rooms. This area's potential to become a wine region on par with Napa and Sonoma exists, but wineries, and the businesses around them, need to embrace visitors from near and afar to fully realize the potential of these valleys.

Kramer vineyards is ahead of the times in this respect. If you know absolutely nothing about wines, they are more than happy to walk you through theirs and give you an idea of what to start with if you are just introducing yourself to Oregon wine, without making you feel you are some uncultured dolt. On the other hand if you absolutely insist on chatting about every detail of wines from around the world and their relation to your theories on the interconnectedness of Lee Harvey Oswald, the Curse of the Bambino and NAFTA, they can roll right along with you without letting on that you are a boorish snob. They also have non-wine products such as t-shirts, condiments, posters and books available which make the tasting room more colorful and user

friendly. For pure entertainment ask them to demonstrate the wine cork spoon for you. It's Lettermanesque.

You are encouraged to bring a lunch to Kramer and hang out in their picnic area which overlooks the vineyard. It's a very family kind of place so they even have entertainment for kids if you happen to be afflicted with them. Only two rules exist (that I know of): 1) Don't walk in the vineyard, and 2) No tipping Bob the Knight over.

**Recommended Wine Tour for May:** Things start getting into swing at the wineries during this month. You can go the traditional way and do any of the various counties' Memorial Day Weekend Celebrations and have a great time, however, as usual, I recommend something a little off the beaten path. On Memorial Day there are a few wineries that are open only that weekend out of the whole year. In Yamhill County Adelsheim Vineyard (beautiful labels), McKinlay Vineyards and Tempest Vineyards, all in Newberg, and Panther Creek Cellars in McMinnville open their doors on this weekend. Further South, around Salem, Evesham Wood Vineyard, Cristom Vineyards, St. Innocent Winery and Strangeland Winery are open as well. You will be likelier to beat the relatively large crowds that go to the wineries this weekend and end up in more intimate settings with a heartier, more interesting set of wine tasters. Remember, buy one bottle at least wherever you go, and tell them that the Upper Left Edge sent you.

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**Art Heals**

Once again we find ourselves proud of our little town. Kathleen Krushas, our political consultant, former co-worker and dear friend, came to town again this year collecting art for the Cascade Aids Association Arts Auction. If you don't see a lot of mainstream media you might not know that the Cascade Aids Project has been taking some shots lately. The books weren't too good and some bills didn't get paid, but they are working things out and look to come out of it stronger. As Kathleen said, "We have to keep working, there is no one else." Anyway, we were needlessly apprehensive about folks doing as well as last year, when little ole Cannon Beach artists and galleries donated ten percent of the pieces sold. We, and by that we mean everyone who has been touched by AIDS, would like to thank the generous artists and galleries who are helping others in these difficult times. Your beloved rev. was in the bookstore that Sunday as the art arrived, so much, so beautiful, so quickly given. We were reminded that it was Easter Sunday, and had to smile, as our somewhat pagan friends brought gifts to the suffering, in the spirit of the man whose resurrection our christian friends were celebrating. It is hoped that this tragedy of AIDS will help to begin to bring people together in compassion, understanding, and hope, as we seek a cure.

Our latest word from Kathleen is the auction raised over \$14,000 and our neighbors in Cannon Beach again were a disproportionately large part of that total. You make us proud.

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