



Very rarely does a winery come fully loaded with excellent and unique wine, a superb location and great people. **Amity Vineyards** is one of those rare instances where everything has come together perfectly. In this small winery is housed an intensity and passion for wine making that goes virtually unrivaled in our part of the world. You owe it to yourself to go to this winery, located about 7 miles south of McMinnville in Amity, and explore one of the state's great small business and wine industry success stories.

One of the first things that will jump out at you about Amity is the view from the winery. Amity faces slightly southwest and looks out over southern Yamhill County to the coast range. The winery is perched atop a knoll at an elevation of about 500 feet affording it one of the most striking viewpoints you could hope for. An evening visit gave me the opportunity to witness a spectacular sunset. The distance I could see nearly convinced me I was looking at Cape Perpetua peering over the line of mountains. This is a fantastic place to picnic during this summer of warm, sunny weather.

Amity Vineyards has moved toward the forefront of Oregon's premium wine production over the past 5 years through years of effort, learning and determination on the part of owner and winemaker Myron Redford. If you are fortunate enough to drop by when he happens to be working the tasting room, give yourself some time to ask some questions. Myron is one of the more animated and talkative individuals you could hope to run into. His obvious enjoyment comes from the years of personal labor he has put into every single aspect of his winery.

Amity had very humble beginnings. Myron purchased the vineyard in 1974, sans winery, with a desire to make fine wine and a knowledge of how to do it from years of being a self-described cellar rat at Columbia Winery in Washington. Unfortunately, being a small winery owner requires an in-depth knowledge of farming, something Myron lacked. His original goal of completely organic vineyard farming quickly ran into the reality of Mother Nature. It was an admirable goal but, having very little in the way of equipment, the labor required to keep the vineyard productive was prohibitive. Lessons were learned the hard way, vines died and less grapes than expected were produced. He learned though and eventually began to produce successful crops and increase the size of his vineyard. He also designed and built the winery with no professional help. To come from such humble beginnings to where Amity is now is a testimony to the power of endurance and zeal.

The winery has expanded significantly, but artifacts from the early years linger. Outside the winery are two wooden structures that serve as decorative ornaments. They are actually part of the winery's legacy. They are the old style wine presses although they look like they are better suited for housing petunias. When in use these presses held a maximum of 700 pounds of grapes. Each batch of grapes had to be pressed 3 times to wring all the juices out. In 1977, with 4 of these presses, they processed 52 tons of grapes. Some quick math shows that they had to press in the neighborhood of 200 batches of grapes 3 times apiece. Not the speediest way to make wine.

In 1978 they ran into a bit of luck. Bad weather. It ruined the wheat crop of Yamhill County and the area was declared an agricultural disaster area. Myron, who lost about \$1,000 worth of grapes, went down to see the local G-Man who told him that Amity Vineyards was eligible for low interest government loans. Salvation. Modern wine making equipment and more barrels were purchased with these loans and Amity hit a highwater mark. They hadn't quite turned the corner though. It wasn't until 1983 that they went into the black for a year, just before the Oregon mid-80's recession. In 1989 the market for their wines finally began to become more consistent and they have now established themselves as one of the area's premier wineries.

Some of the money from those government loans went to commission stainless steel storage tanks made by a Northwest company. Not just any company but one that specialized in making saw blades for local mills. After two tanks this company gave up on this part of their business, but two of the people in the company left to start a business of their own, JY Northwest, that would specialize in these tanks. Today that company manufactures most of the vats used by the Northwest's numerous microbreweries. (Which business do you think is the happy camper now?) If this doesn't explicitly portray how the growing wine and microbrew industries in Oregon and Washington can help in making the desperately needed shift away from an economy that has, for too long, relied on cutting down trees, I don't know what does.

Of course, Amity now has modern equipment, numerous fermenting tanks and a decent sized barrel storage room, but it still has a homespun feel to it. If you manage to snag a tour out of someone and you go at the right time of year (ASAP) you will see carboys, wine bottles and random jugs filled with wine alongside the more traditional casks and kegs. For those of you that think owning a winery and making wine is all about Robert Mondavi and his fur-bedecked wife standing out in the vineyard sipping their latest bottle of \$250 Chardonnay, this is a close up view of the reality of 99% of winemakers.

The key to making excellent wine lies in having a firm philosophy on how you are going to go about doing it. Myron has an iron clad grip on his wine making philosophy: "Don't oak it." There is a sign on the back wall of the tasting room that reads SAY NO TO OAK HELP PUT THE FRUIT BACK IN WINE. This will let you know, even before you taste, what you can look forward to. Myron refers to the trend in wine making, not only here, but around the world, to expose virtually every variety of wine to newly toasted French Oak as "a sickness, a disease." His point is that the taste of oak can mask the true flavor and character of a wine and make almost anything taste like an oaked Chardonnay. His wine does age in oak barrels but not in newly produced ones which give the oaky flavor to wines. Because of this style of wine making you, as the taster, should be prepared for an education on what wines really taste like.

The most distinct wine their style of wine making shows up in is the pinot noir. Amity's Pinots are fruity but still rich and complex. They are different from most Oregon Pinots but the quality of the wine is exceptionally high, even in what they consider their lower end wines. Their flagship wine, 1987 Pinot noir, (a deal at \$12) is an excellent example of Amity Pinots. Many wineries would be proud to call the '87 Pinot a reserve wine but Myron is nothing if not patient. He has aged his specially selected grapes 5 years in the bottle and in August Amity's 1987 Pinot noir Reserve (\$25) will finally be released. Before you drink your bottle of this beautiful wine give it plenty of time to breath because it will be a little tight right after you uncork it. Along with the Reserve Pinot is the 1990 Estate Pinot noir (\$18). These two wines are both classic examples of what Pinot noir really should taste like. They are soft and warm in the mouth with very distinct fruit flavors that finish with a pleasing intensity. These are the premier wines of Amity.

The 4th Pinot noir to look for is their sulfite free, organically grown Eco-wine. Amity was the first winery in Oregon to produce this type of wine. Most sulfite free and/or organic wine is, well, not so good. It may be that these wines are produced to satisfy a certain "groovy" market and the quality of the wine is secondary to the mere fact that it exists. Amity's Eco-Wine (\$10.50) is deep and bold by comparison to most wines of this genre and is ready to drink now although I suggest waiting 6-10 months. There is a slightly oatmeal taste to it right now that is simply the result of not having sulfites in the wine to protect it from the minimal amount of oxygen in the bottle. It will dissipate in time. Buy several bottles and watch it change month by month.

One of the great things about Amity wines, aside from their taste, is their packaging. I worked for an environmental and consumer group that tried to pass a packaging law so I know good packaging when I see it. On the back of each bottle Myron tells you what that bottle of wine will taste like. From a consumer perspective it is a dream come true. If you've ever gone to buy wine and ended up with something you did not really like or expect to end up with you probably have wished that this information was available. The labels on the front of the bottle are exceptional as well. The bottles make great oil lamps when the wine is finished. Kudos.

Amity is rightfully acknowledged for their Pinot noir but their other wines are well worth exploring. Two are of particular note. The 1993 Dry Gewurztraminer (\$8.50) is an outstanding wine. This is surely the 1st time I have ever said this. I am not a big Gewurz fan but this particular one is dry but not bone dry and spicy enough to counter the residual sugars in it. I snatched up a couple of bottles to serve with grilled spicy prawns which I have recently discovered how to cook to perfection.

The other wine is a collector's item. It is a 1992 Riesling Late Harvest Select Cluster (\$15). This wine is absolutely mind blowing. I am not one given to religious experiences but I can honestly say the first time I tried this one I at least came close to one. Its labeling, Select Cluster, approximates the German rating system of sweet wines which the Germans are famed for. Without going into too much detail and without having to spell too many German words I will try to give you an idea of what this means. Sugar level equals quality in German wines. The sweeter the better. The term *tröcher beerenauslese* means "berry select". If you have ever seen the ad of Juan Valdez and his burro walking around the hills of Columbia selecting individual beans for Maxwell House coffee (NOT) this is actually how this classification of wine is produced. "Berry select" indicates a residual sugar level of no less than 36%. The Select Cluster Riesling of Amity is 34% residual sugar classifying it as a beerenauslese. It is essentially a honey-apricot mead. Myron says that if you didn't want to drink the wine it would probably make a great body ointment. Such possibilities.

This winery is well worth the trip. You can pick up their wines at Cannon Beach's two fine wine shops, but to get a sense of their wines and a much better selection of their premier wines you simply must make the journey. Bring your checkbook because you will want to leave with more than one bottle. They have great case discounts, by the way. Remember to mention that you read about them in the Edge.

Recommended Wine Tour for August: A month with interesting possibilities. Two events I highly recommend are the Summer Sunset Barbeque at **Tualatin Vineyards** in Forest Grove on Friday the 19th. A 4 course meal and wine for \$35/person is a great deal at this wonderful winery. The following two days, the 20th and 21st, at **Kandson Erath** in Dundee is their 23rd Annual Harvest Festival. There will be music, food, jugglers and other entertainment. For \$6/person you get a complimentary glass, wine tastes and access to the great parties that they throw.

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Emily Lotney

UPPER LEFT EDGE AUGUST 1997 7

Jay Raskin
Architect

P.O. Box 1160
Cannon Beach, OR
97110
503-436-2162