

Get Back, Napa!

The outlying and urban wineries of Eugene. BY LANCE SPARKS

Recent cover story in *Main Ingredient*, trade mag published by the Oregon Restaurant Association, headlines: "Oregon Wines Are Hot." Possible responses: Wow, no kidding? Whodathunk? Or: **PICK UP YOUR MESSAGES, PEOPLE!**

Oregon wines have been bustin' out all over. We've had a nearly decade-long run of vintages that rated from very good to outstanding (with a couple of shaky years, '95 and '97, when some folks made yummy wines and others struggled). Oregon pinot noir in particular — a winelover's daydream and a grape-grower's nightmare — has roused rave reviews from the world wine press. But Oregon pinot gris — crisply dry white that keeps lovely company with fish (especially salmon) — has elicited equal or greater enthusiasm. Lately, other whites — pinot blanc, riesling, gewurztraminer — have earned stellar ratings. Even some "big reds" (cabernet sauvignon, syrah, merlot, zinfandel) from our high-heat regions, such as the Rogue Valley and the Columbia Gorge, have drawn grudging respect. Add it up: Just a few decades ago wine sages argued that Oregon was too cool, too wet, too something to grow wine grapes; now, the only real questions that remain involve deciding just which of our valleys will be best for certain wine.

The real news — MESSAGE COMING IN! — is that Eugene ranks among the best wine areas in the state. Oh, sure, wandering wine mavens still gravitate to Polk and Yamhill counties, drawn by labels with glam and bling — Domaine Drouhin with its French cachet comes to mind — but the juice produced in and around Bluegene is elbowing local labels into the front rows.

Our fair burg is ringed by strong vineyards and producers. Start at Monroe where Benton Lane just completed a new facility and where Broadley Vineyards has thrived for decades (their '94 Claudia's Choice Pinot Noir was rated top pinot in the world for that vintage by *Wine Spectator*). In tiny Cheshire, we have Rain Song. Junction City boasts High Pass. Elmira's got LaVelle Vineyards with a broad array of wines and a beautiful tasting room in the Fifth Street Market. Secret House Vineyards in Veneta also produces a strong line-up, including some very good sparkling wines. For wild variety of unusual wines, though, little Lorane's Chateau Lorane has few rivals.

But Eugene itself has been showing real muscle at the center of the ring:

Hinman/Silvan Ridge is one of the

vors and perfectly balanced. We also love the Silvan Ridge Early Muscat, a semi-sparkling dessert wine with delicate lychee-like fruit, just terrific.

The stronghold for Eugene wineries is the castle on the hill, King Estate. King wines rate consistently among the state's best — especially their stylish pinot gris, regular and reserve, but their single-vineyard and Estate pinot noirs, which are distinctive and distinguished, defined by that special quality called

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most venerable sites in Oregon (est. 1979), and since being acquired by the Chambers family has been dedicated to producing top quality wines, especially pinot noir and gris, but also some surprises: We recently tasted the Silvan Ridge 2002 Viognier, a dry white traditionally grown in France's Rhone Valley; the SR version was delicious, crisp with bright fruit fla-

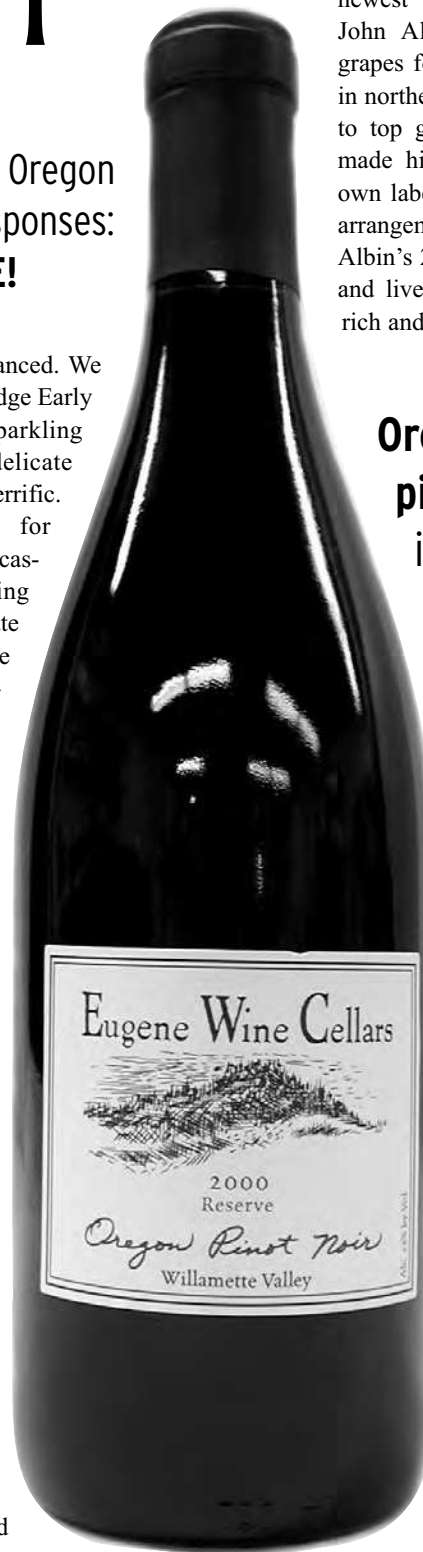
vor, the complex flavors of defined place. But the skilled King staff have also extended their expertise and use of their state-of-the-art facilities to other winemakers. This kind

of collegiality, in contrast to cut-throat competitiveness, can only ensure that Oregon wines continue to develop and the industry to mature, and all ships rise on the rising tide.

Case in point, Eugene's newest label, J. Albin Winery: John Albin has been growing grapes for "23 years and going" in northeast Yamhill, selling fruit to top growers. In 2000, Albin made his first wines under his own label through a cooperative arrangement with King Estate. Albin's 2002 Pinot Gris is bright and lively, the 2001 Pinot Noir rich and round.

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Bruce and Bettina Biehl's Eugene Wine Cellars is located smack in the heart of the city, 255 Madison Street, and their broad line-up of wines can be sampled in their tasting room.



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