

# Oregon's Eco-Wines

Wine labels of the future tell more than year and vineyard.

BY CHRIS AMMON

Far away from the fluorescent-lit glow of the supermarket wine aisle, there was a time when Italian and Swiss immigrants lugged their glass jugs to the local winery to have them filled with table-wine. It's a rather homespun image — plain glass jugs, filled straight from the source — one that suggests a life where consumer and producer might be linked by eye contact and shared anecdotes, the vineyard in plain view.

But outside of vineyard tours, more a novelty than norm, firsthand familiarity with the land and its tenders is rare. As the Oregon wine industry grows — acreage has more than doubled in the past ten years and sales have increased 331 percent — consumers are now demanding a more intimate look at the state's winegrowing practices, asking questions about growing methods and impacts on the surrounding eco-systems.

To answer these questions, winegrowers are relying on the wine label to communicate with the consumer. "It's huge," says Laura Lotspeich, owner of Pheasant Hill vineyards in southern Oregon. "The label has got to tell your story."

The challenge for eco-friendly growers is squeezing all this information onto the label without it looking like a bottle of Dr. Bronner's All-One soap. The proliferation of third-party

certification programs for Oregon wine has helped to solve this problem by assigning "eco-labels" to wines that meet specific standards of sustainability. At best, eco-labels instill confidence in the consumer, ensuring them that the product they buy has been made responsibly. But they can also be problematic. Eco-labels are sometimes ambiguous, exploited or misunderstood.

Fortunately, when it comes to eco-friendliness, Oregon wine ranks well; the state's vineyards have been spared from the pests that have afflicted California vineyards, such as *phylloxera* and Pierce's disease, making pesticide-use less tempting. Also, Oregon wineries tend to be small, family-run operations, begun by people who moved to the state to get away from corporate farming. This "green culture" makes growers especially receptive to eco-labels. In all, Oregon winegrowers have embraced four different eco-labeling programs:

**LIVE:** Adopted in 1999, the Oregon LIVE (Low Input Viticulture and Enology) program offers certification to growers who make a substantial



effort to incorporate sustainable practices into their vineyard management strategies. LIVE stands out through its connection to the International Organization for Biological Control (IOBC), a global certifying body used in Europe since the 1940s.

To attain LIVE certification, winegrowers attend training sessions to learn how to minimize irrigation, reduce pesticide use, prevent stream erosion and, at the same time, maintain grape quality. Their vineyards are then inspected and evaluated using a point system. Proponents laud the program for its flexibility, viewing it as a practical alternative to the restrictive requirements of organic certification.

But critics feel the program is too broad; growers who use no pesticides receive exactly the same label on their bottle as growers who use controversial pesticides like Round-Up. This caused one of Oregon's largest wine producers, King Estate winery, to drop out of the program. King Estate general manager Brad Biehl explains that "we were basically in a pool of

people that were still, what we consider, using chemicals that weren't necessary." Instead, the winery opted for organic certification.

**SALMON SAFE:** Founded in 1995, the Salmon Safe program promotes agricultural practices that protect water quality and salmon habitat. The agency offers its label to growers who prevent stream erosion by planting cover crops and planting trees along banks. Without these efforts, silt covers salmon eggs, preventing them from spawning.

According to executive director Dan Kent, the Salmon Safe labeling program benefits not only the salmon, but the winegrowers, too. "When the Salmon Safe label appears on a bottle of wine as part of, say, a month long campaign in a Wild Oats or in a Whole Foods market, we see wine sales increase by 15 percent to 20 percent, so it really does work."

In 1999, Salmon Safe partnered with LIVE in a joint certification program. LIVE certified growers automatically receive Salmon Safe certification. As with the LIVE label, Salmon Safe certification does not guarantee that the vineyard is organic.

**CERTIFIED ORGANIC:** The Certified Organic label offers guidelines aimed at controlling pesticide and herbicide use. Aside from being one of the oldest and best known eco-labels, it is also a prime example of how diffi-

**WIDMER BROTHERS**

CREATING AN EVEN BETTER BEER THROUGH FIELD RESEARCH

TEST SUBJECT: Jason Gearhart


WIDMER BEER OF CHOICE: Hefeweizen

CHOICE OF MUSTARD: Spicy Brown


— DAY 22 —

Today we tested the ideal "kindling mix" for proper brat grilling. The combination of chicory, half an abandoned hornet's nest and an old bra found underneath the subject's deck was deemed ideal. Next, we measured the effects of lemon on our Hefeweizen. Results proved to be delicious, with the flavor consistently scoring above 9.5 on the Rheinnann/Gruber Pleasure Scale.


Smoke Caused only minimal hair loss.



Kurt and Rob put out small chemical fire before lunchtime.



The brat tested positive for Hefeweizen compatibility — and trace amounts of Actinium-238.



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