

PHOTO BY MELISSA BEARNS

Barely Legal

WINE 101 By Christine Mathias

I had just returned from Italy where my family and I toured the Chianti wine region of Tuscany. As my aunt sipped a Brunello and then held a half-hour conversation with the wine maker about how the French oak barrels really bring out the flavor, I stood humbly behind her trying to understand their jargon. I nodded along while they described in exquisite detail each flavor on their palette.

When I got home I had a mission: Learn everything I could about wine. I bought a *Wine Spectator* magazine, only to find out that wine writers seem to be a part of a very prestigious culture. If you're still green, it's difficult to follow their articles. Then my

visited were so willing to answer questions, they cheerfully would have explained the difference between red and white.

The "tour" took us more than 100 miles. If you don't want to devote an entire day to touring the wineries, you can visit the three in town (See Lance Sparks' article) for tastings and an excellent Cliff Notes wine education. I stopped at just one, **LaVelle Wine Bar & Bistro**, owned by Doug LaVelle who also operates the local vineyard by the same name. There I sampled both Pinots, the regular and the vintage select, as well as their Merlot.

The wine was tasty, but the best part of the visit was talking to LaVelle, who has an attitude toward wine that I can really get

events year-round out at the vineyard. He's all about the perfect pairings of wine and different dishes too. He just invested \$10,000 into the kitchen at the bistro so they can offer a full menu of foods, served in small portions so you can try more than one.

I learned that Cabernets and Merlots are more complex than Pinots, best served with red meat such as a thick, juicy steak. A Pinot, on the other hand, can support the richness of the steak, but will also pair well with tomato-based pasta sauces or even salmon.

We could have stayed all day, but it was time to hit the open road and take the full tour. Just past Veneta, Territorial Highway

Located up a winding gravel road off Territorial Highway, **Secret House Vineyards** lives up to its name. After initially missing the sign and the turn, we finally made it to the small aluminum house the color of split-pea soup that serves as their tasting room. The house is nestled in a grove of overgrown trees and peeks out onto a majestic landscape of rolling hills. On the December day I visited, mist seeped through the trees, pouring over the adjacent hilltop.

The Chappel family has owned and operated Secret House since 1986, but their first major wine production came in 1991. Today four employees turn out 5,000 cases of wine annually. "We wear a lot of hats," said General Manager Jana West, with the kind of chuckle that tells you it's not just a lot of hats, it's a lot of work. The official winemaker, 23-year-old Chad Dalton, gets plenty of help.

When I asked West to tell me some wine basics, she suggested wine festivals for the beginner. The Secret House holds a Wine and Blues concert series in August, and participates in the annual Newport Seafood and Wine Festival, where more than 40 Oregon wineries congregate for sampling and music. "Wine is an acquired taste," West said, "so gateway wines [introductory wines] would be sweeter." West suggested Riesling, Muscat and Gewürztraminer to start off a wine newbie because they're all sweet white wines without the tannins, which create the bite in a typical dry white or red wine. Tannins form when yeast ferments and they give the wine a "chalky" aftertaste, often described as dry.

"We're in Pinot country," West said, meaning this environment is where Pinot grapes grow best. "The grapes like to be cool at night, which means that Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris are good here." The long growing season, cool nights and clay-loam soil of Oregon produce some of the best Pinot Gris, a mutation of the Pinot Noir grape that probably originated in the Burgundy region of France in the Middle Ages. *Noir*, I learn, is a French word meaning black, and *gris* means gray.

Behind the tasting room, steel vats store hundreds of gallons of wine. There I met the grounds keeper, one of those multiple hat-wearers. He was going through the tedious process involved in making one of the Secret House Vineyards' most prized wines: a unique sparkling red wine called Early Muscat.

He removed each bottle from a wooden holder that looked like a gigantic slice of Swiss cheese, raised the bottle over his head, then swung it down. "You have to shake the bottles after the second fermentation," he said. "And twist the bottles each morning." The process moves the dead yeast from the bottom of the bottle to the top so it can be filtered out.

Hinman Vineyards/Silvan Ridge was our next stop. In production for 25 years, Hinman/Silvan is the oldest vineyard in Lane County, and the 14th oldest in Oregon. When the Chambers family bought it in 1979, they adopted Carolyn Chambers' maiden name, Carolyn Silvan, and added the Silvan Ridge line of wines. Silvan Ridge is known for its reserve wines, which means the "best-of-the-best" grapes are used, while the Hinman Vineyard label has cheaper "easy sippers but not as complex."

The 15 winemakers and cellarmates at Hinman/Silvan harvest enough grapes to

I realized you don't have to be able to pick out the "notes of chocolate and smoke" in a Chianti Classico or the "elegant array of cream and fruit flavors" in a Chardonnay to develop your own taste for the wide variety of wines.

editor suggested we tour the wineries. "Lot's of people are afraid to really get into wine because of that elite snobbery," she said. "You're 21, right?" Yes. Barely.

Was I scared to venture into the expert world uneducated? Just slightly. At first, when they lined up those tasting glasses, I worried I'd have to give my opinion of each bottle. But there's no need to fear wine experts. The employees at the wineries I

behind. "What I hate is when you walk into a tasting room and the guy behind the counter is looking at you like, 'I know something you don't know, and if you're really nice I might tell you,'" he said. "Wine should be fun."

LaVelle works hard to make wine into a full social experience complete with music and food. He's got a wine club with more than 800 members and throws parties and

is home to six functioning Oregon wineries and five more lie within the rolling hills nearby. I went to three of those wineries.

I had fun. More importantly, I realized you don't have to be able to pick out the "notes of chocolate and smoke" in a Chianti Classico or the "elegant array of cream and fruit flavors" in a Chardonnay to develop your own taste for the wide variety of wines.