

Battling Birds

The endless war of wings and wine in Willamette Valley BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

Above us, avian overlords command the sky. They are capable of traveling great distances across open sea, hovering motionless in midair and swooping down to seize prey between sharp talons. Sure, some of them seem harmless, but who really knows what they're doing when they're soaring overhead, hiding in the trees like government assassins or peering into your bedroom window like spies?

For centuries, these fowl things were the emissaries of kings and queens, tasked with carrying sensitive information capable of toppling governments and ruining lives. Centuries before that, evidence suggests that they may have hunted our ancestors.

Birds should never be trusted, particularly because they sometimes stand in the way between man and wine — an intolerable offense. One could even go so far as to speculate that this aggression is personal — a preemptive strike of sorts, aimed at keeping man in his place, on the ground and without solace.

Ask almost any wino and he will tell you that he imbibes his medicine in an attempt to feel at peace. It's ironic, really, because what symbol does mankind primarily associate with peace? A dove. This is a deep-seeded sort of thing.

Most people who own and work vineyards would agree. "They're pests," says local vineyard worker James Shelly, who has plied his trade all around the world. "They can make it so you don't make any money at all off a harvest."

Robins, starlings, mockingbirds, finches — during the fall, when grapes hang heavy on the vine, these creatures become the enemy of wine. They will fly miles from their roosts to feed, and once they've targeted a food source it is incredibly difficult to get them to leave. The sweeter or earlier the grape, the more the birds crave it. So vineyard hands have been forced to retaliate, in the name of wine.

"If you have a treeline anywhere near your vineyard, you've got bird problems," says Dustin Lotspeich, manager of Pheasant Hill Vineyard in Talent. "Strategically deploying bird netting is one method we use."

You can intuit from Lotspeich's language just how serious this war has become. And, as is the case with most warfare, he who holds the psychological advantage often wins.

One of the most effective weapons vineyard folks uti-



OWNER DEAN INMAN AND TUCKER DOG OF MASON RIDGE VINEYARDS PREPARE THE PROPANE CANON, ONE OF SEVERAL BIRD DETERRENENTS

lize against the feathered invaders is acoustic repellent. Digital recordings of birds under stress are set on a timer and played in the vicinity of the grapes as well as near surrounding treelines, all in an effort to dissuade the birds. This tactic seems solid. I mean, think about it: If you heard the sounds of human beings screaming bloody murder outside your new favorite restaurant, you probably wouldn't go near that place to get dinner.

There are times, however, when the flocks are too massive, the enemy too strong. In these cases vineyards are forced to employ even more powerful weapons against the birds.

Enter the bird bangers. These nonlethal explosive repellants are intended to haze the birds, similar to the way a concussion grenade exploding in your kitchen might compel you to stop eating and leave immediately. Some of these bird bangers can get pretty serious.

"Yeah, when it gets real bad you might have to use a propane canon," Lotspeich says.

This canon does not actually fire a projectile, but rather uses propane gas to cause a detonation that closely mimics a shotgun.

Though this may seem a bit extreme, when you hear horror stories about flocks of birds cleaning out more than a ton of fruit in one season, you might reconsider — that's a lot of wine to miss out on.

On large vineyards in other countries, the warfare is bloodier. "I've seen plenty of birds get smoked on vineyards in New Zealand during harvest season," Shelly says.

The picture Shelly paints of his time on New Zealand vineyards is apocalyptic in scale. Often workers are employed for the sole purpose of combating birds. He says men armed with shotguns and riding ATVs were constantly on patrol, blasting and hazing the birds with impunity. It would seem the war between wings and spirits has indeed become one of attrition.

It's illegal to shoot songbirds in Oregon, so it is unlikely we will see any serious ordnance lobbed into the sky after these armies of winged thieves. But the next time you sit down to enjoy that glass of Oregon pinot, remember those who have fought for your freedom. Freedom isn't free — raise your glass. ❖

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