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WINE BY LANCE SPARKS

WINES OF PASSION

Looking for love down along the Umpqua

Day-um! We just zipped through another year and it's time again for our annual gushing about the Wines of Love.

But this year we begin with an adventure, a journey into the Hundred Valleys carved by the various forks and myriad creeks of the winding, wilding Umpqua River.

Three of us packed into Kevin Cayfez's micro-sedan, then rolled 60-plus miles south. Kevin drove. Larry Malmgren, a close friend and certified pinot-nut, took the back seat. I rode shotgun so I could quiz Kevin about himself and his new wine-gig, a guided-tour business called Wine 2 Vine. Kevin is young, 30s, dynamic, former teacher of math and science and, like so many talented people in Oregon wine, a former King Estater (three-plus years in Papa King's Pinot Passion Pit, aka Tasting Room), now employed at Sabai, the super Thai restaurant in Oakway Center. Kevin proposed to take us to two of his Umpqua tour destinations, wineries where his guests will encounter people who bring passion and personality to their wines.

The Umpqua Valley possesses a dizzyingly complex topography where a form of love — the love of wine, particularly Riesling — drew the late Richard Sommer to revive (in 1961) Oregon's romance with the vine in the post-Prohibition era. Note: Early pioneers had planted grapevines and made their wines as early as the mid-1800s. Prohibition, begun in Oregon in 1916, so effectively erased their early successes that Sommer, decades later, had to overcome the academic "wisdom" that Oregon was too cool, too wet — too *something* — ever to become a wine region. The state now has around 400 wineries and is still growing, with wine contributing a couple billion bux to our economy yearly. Sommer's HillCrest Vineyards still thrives, as do such viticultural enterprises as the Henry family's Henry Estate (1978) and Girardet family's Girardet Vineyards (1971). Today, the Umpqua is home to more than 20

wineries, including some of Oregon's best, and growing rapidly.

We exited I-5 just past Sutherlin, the southern boundary of the Umpqua viticultural area. We skirted HillCrest and Henry Estate but turned north, motoring through softly undulating hills and along the banks of the winter-roiling river. We turned into a gravel drive marked Reustle-Prayer Rock, twisted through trees, glimpsed recently planted vineyards, arriving at sculpted gardens and the crafted "caves" of the winery. Since 2001, Stephen and Gloria Reustle (rhymes with *hustle*) have transformed their 40 acres into a showplace for their zeal for wines (they make a dozen or so) and their fervent faith.

Never seen their distinctive orange label? That's 'cause they don't sell retail, except at the winery; all their production goes to their 2,200-member wine club (easy to join, with attractive discounts). Kevin's tourers are going to feel enchanted here. The tasting area has been constructed to look and feel like Old-World cloisters or catacombs, but the wines are most attractive, including **2011 Gruner Veltliner** (\$24), a dry white cultivated mainly in Austria but thriving here, yielding heady scents/flavors of citrus and white pepper, with bracing acidity. **R-PR 2009 Pinot Noir** (\$31) is ripe, round and ready to drink. R-PR's syrah and tempranillo are prize-winners, but we really liked their dry-style **2010 Riesling** with its yummy pear/mineral notes. Tasting in the cave is more than cool.

Next stop, down the winding road: **Delfino Vineyards**, a transformed 160-acre ranch (18 acres now planted in grapes), modest tasting room, artisanal, estate-grown wines, excellent **2011 Muller Thurgau** (\$16) — crisply dry, flavors of flowers and citrus — and especially notable **2010 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$24), rich, complex and delish. Jim Delfino has the thick shoulders of a farmer and the quick smile of a salesman. Terri, his wife, was abed, recovering from a nasty surgery. It's clear, though, that there's a lotta love in the Delfino air — and the Delfino wines.

Passion in winemaking inspires the ardor stirred in wine-drinking, and those devotions contribute to a life worth living. Seeking love leads to adventures, journeys into the embrace of the vines. Love might not be all we need, but it's a swell place to launch — or end — this journey.

Wishing you a fine Valentine. ■

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