

EXPLORING THE REGION

So much local wine, so little time

A mole in a pout is a sight to behold, rare, and slightly scary.

Thinking I was early, I had ridden the wheezing Otis to the 15th floor of Eugene's oldest high-rise, shuffled down the hall to our office, Wine Investigations, found Mole already in our lab, in a mope. "Hey, Sleut'," he said, "whatcha got from all yer trackin' wit' out me?"

There it was: He felt hurt that I'd been on the wine trail without him. I had just returned from three days with Kat, wining and dining in the Walla Walla Valley (more on the results later), then solo visits to some local producers we hadn't covered recently. Mole brightened when I told him about our experience at High Pass Winery; he beamed when I told him that our host, Lynn Wysocky, asked about him, even raised a glass, "To Mole!"

"Cool," sez Mole, "so is Dieter Boehm (High Pass owner) still farming?"

"'Workin' in the rain,' he said, 'with Mother Nature.' His lovely wife, Fridah, dropped in briefly, then Dieter himself."

"Sweet, and what's about the wines?"

"All good," I replied, "but several really special."

High Pass Winery and vineyards are located at the far western rim of the grid. Drive to Junction City, turn left on High Pass Road, continue about a zillion miles, follow signs, check out edgy country living. High Pass Road becomes Lavell; stay on it. Slow down when you start seeing meticulously tended vineyards. Wind up the gravel drive; signs point to the winery. A clean, well-appointed tasting room awaits.

Dieter Boehm reminds me of the late, great Richard Sommer (HillCrest, Roseburg) in treating each of his vines like his grandchildren. He also bottles some tasty juice, all priced fairly.

High Pass 2011 Riesling is crisp and clean, with a touch of minerality (\$12). Their **2014 Rosé of Pinot Noir** delivers pretty fruit (\$11), but the **2014 Sauvignon Blanc** surprises, with citrus flavors, tropical notes, the fruit coming from the estate's "Union School" vineyard (\$15). Dieter's **2010 Pinot Noir** from his "**Zauberberg**" ("Magic Mountain") block is serious pinot, lavish in black cherry flavors, finely balanced (\$30). The star of the High Pass

line-up has to be the **2013 Scheurebe, Late Harvest**, yummy dessert wine with 12 to 15 percent residual sugar (\$NA). This wine will be released only at the Barrel Tour, June 13. Mole adds, "Gotta go fer dat."

I also popped in on the Oregon Wine Lab, 488 Lincoln St., to confer with proprietor/winemaker Mark Nicholl, the talented Aussie behind William Rose wines. I sipped, listened: Mark knows his wines. He offered an impressive array but two really stood out: **William Rose 2014 "Prohibition Rose" Rosé of Sangiovese** is bone dry but lively in fruit flavors (red fruits, rose petals) (\$18), terrific when the days grow long and hot and the foods are cool. Nicholl says his **Wm Rose 2013 Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc** (50/50 blend) will be "bloody magnificent" with oysters; flavors of stone fruits, citrus and white flowers will open up with fresh bivalves (\$28).

One more: **Wm Rose 2013 Pinot Noir** is a shocker, superb (\$34). Tiny production; don't miss.

Mole sez, "We tries not ta miss anybody. But there's so much wine, so little time." We're unashamed locavores, 'cause our local growers are making some of the best wines anywhere. We know exciting wines are being made in places like Silvan Ridge, Bennett, Iris, more than 20 others in the south Willamette Valley.

We'll get there — together, usually. ■

GARDENING BY RACHEL FOSTER



BLUE BLOSSOM AND FRIENDS

Colorful Ceanothus shrubs do well in dry clay soils

Few things in the plant world are as blue as the flowers on the bluest ceanothus. Otherwise known as wild lilac or California lilac, shrubs of this genus (which are not lilacs at all) are native to the Americas, mostly California and south to Guatemala. The majority are evergreen. That and their often stunning flower color makes the genus popular in gardens. Wild lilacs with the deepest blue flowers mostly come from California species, but Oregon has several species well worth growing.

Ceanothus thyrsiflorus (blue blossom) is native to California and Oregon as far north as Lane County, adorning hillsides and forest edges with powder blue flowers in April and May. According to Paul Bonine, proprietor of Xera Plants, it's the species from which the popular cultivar "Victoria" was selected. Xera Plants specializes in plants for our summer-dry climate and is well known to plant nerds. Happily, Bonine recently opened a retail plant shop in southeast Portland.

Bonine points out that ceanothus are successional

plants in the wild and may be the first shrubs to occupy areas disturbed by fire or logging. All are nitrogen fixers and quick growers. Aside from improving soil fertility, some species provide shading for seedling trees that will eventually shade them out. Most species tolerate many types of soil, including clay, so long as it is dry or very well drained in summer. The plants should not be coddled, Bonine says: "Over-improved soil will lead to prodigious growth, less hardiness to cold and can leave the larger varieties susceptible to wind-rock." You can expect plants to live as few as seven years, or as much as 20 if they are strictly un-watered.

These are great shrubs for low-water gardeners, and Bonine is making his own selections of blue blossom and other species collected from the northern limit of their range to ensure more hardiness to cold. Bonine claims that *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* "Oregon Mist" is the first introduction of a ceanothus cultivar selected from a plant growing in Oregon. It is a large evergreen shrub (quickly reaching 12 feet tall and as wide) with deep green leaves and strik-

ing turquoise blue flowers. Bonine says the original specimen from which he took cuttings grew in heavy clay soil that was running wet in winter.

The Xera Plants catalog lists 18 ceanothus selections. Many are fast growing plants that become very large in one or both dimensions. (Most of those under 5 feet in height grow 8 to 12 feet wide!) Xera's most compact listing is probably *Ceanothus* x "Blue Jeans," a cold-hardy ceanothus with small holly-like leaves on angular, wiry stems. It grows to 5 feet tall and wide over time. It is one of the earliest to bloom, opening "vivid violet blue flowers" in March and April. It tolerates some summer water and has been "an excellent long term performer" in the Portland area.

Both this and "Oregon Mist" are rated USDA Zone 7a (0° to 5° F). I think we can believe this rating. Following the deep freeze of December 2013, I watched to see how various landscape staples would respond to the cold. Nothing surprised me more than the complete recovery of countless evergreen ceanothus plants in Eugene that had initially turned black and lost their leaves.

For roomy, summer-dry Oregon native gardens there are other species of interest that are sometimes available from native plant nurseries. The shiny, evergreen leaves of snowbrush (*C. velutinus*) are a familiar sight in burned-over west-side forests. The plant has cream flowers and grows up to 8 feet, and is probably the most shade-tolerant ceanothus.

Buckbrush (*C. cuneatus*), also evergreen and native in the Willamette Valley, is extremely cold hardy and is useful for naturalizing on dry, exposed slopes. Bonine lists a form of *C. cuneatus* named "Blue Sierra" (originating, I assume, in California) that has "blue flowers that appear en masse in April and May." Prostrate ceanothus (*Ceanothus prostratus*) sports fragrant, light blue flowers and small, evergreen, holly-like leaves. Although only a few inches high, it spreads to form 4 to 8 feet mats — a useful groundcover.

Redstem ceanothus (*C. sanguineus*), named for purplish-red young stems, is an upright, deciduous shrub that grows 10 to 15 feet and bears white flowers in late spring. It likes full sun. Native from the coast to the mountains, it's considered a valuable host for butterfly larvae. Also deciduous, Deerbrush (*C. integerrimus*) grows 6 to 15 feet tall and bears white to lavender flowers that make quite a show along roadsides and forest edges in the western Cascades. ■

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