

INTO THE WEEDS WITH WINE

Can two growing industries coexist?

“Vineyard owners sue over pot operation,” reads an April headline in *The Register-Guard*. Thus begins a story we might have foreseen like a blip on radar: Two enterprises, both vital not only to Oregon’s economy but to the state’s very identity, both, apparently, on a collision course.

The outlines of the story seem rather simple. For about 18 years, Moe Momtazi and family have cultivated 480 acres of prime Yamhill County hillsides, growing their award-winning grapes and making Maysara wines (a Persian term meaning “house of wine”).

Adjacent to Momtazi’s property, their neighbor, Richard Wagner, planned to grow cannabis. But Momtazi worried that the cannabis might taint his wines with the “skunky” aromas and flavors of the pot; he sued and brought the case before the three Yamhill County Board of Commissioners, even though Wagner had not yet planted a single pot vine.

Before delving deeper, let’s consider context and a bit of history. Prohibition of alcohol came to Oregon in 1916; by 1920, the state was “bone dry.” Before that federal catastrophe, wine had done well here. The early (white, mainly European) immigrants had successfully planted grapevines and made wine; in Jacksonville, the great pioneer photographer Peter Britt had a commercial winery, called Valley View, by the late 1850s.

When the national Prohibition bomb went off in 1920, all wine ventures in Oregon were eradicated, and it wasn’t until 1963 that the late Richard Sommer began the re-vitalization of Oregon wine by planting his vines at HillCrest in the Umpqua Valley.

In January of 1965, David Lett launched Oregon into the pinot noir stratosphere with Eyrie Vineyards near Dundee; when Lett’s 1975 South Block Pinot starred against international competition at the Gault Millau tasting, the rush was on for Oregon.

Now, wine is a \$3-billion-per-year enterprise, and Oregon’s OLCC has bonded more than 700 wineries — a very big deal indeed.

Marijuana’s history in Oregon is hazy, and made hazier by 50 years of strident anti-pot propaganda, along with increasingly draconian law enforcement and punishment, putting thousands of people in jails for mere possession of small amounts of weed.

Nixon’s “War on Drugs” in the 1970s worsened the situation, but over the years, the voting public begged to differ, and by 2014 there were 23 states that passed laws adding marijuana to medications.

Then de-criminalization went into full swing, internationally and state-by-state; by 2016, initiatives opened some states to adult recreational use of marijuana, and pot businesses were launched by the dozens — growing, dispensing, processing and retailing.

Local governments leaped at new sources of tax revenues. Taxation had to be restrained — in 2015 Gov. Kate Brown signed a bill limiting cannabis sales taxes at 25 percent; by 2016, marijuana businesses returned \$75 million to state coffers, not nearly enough to fill the hole in Oregon’s budget, but certainly some welcome dollars.

But the question remains: Can two agricultural enterprises co-exist? Can they cohabit, living and (ahem) growing in the same neighborhood?

When my editor first steered me onto this story a month or so ago, I began calling wine people — experts and scientists in agronomy and viticulture — looking for some science. Passions run high on the wine side as well as on the pot side.

But passions, including desires and fears, are not much help; we want questions answered.

First, could the “volatile aromatics” (the “skunky” aromas) emitted by flowering cannabis actually coat the grapes and enter the wines? “It could happen,” one viniculturist offered, citing as evidence wood smoke from forest fires, then eucalyptus and the Australian experience.

Others I spoke with countered that “Yeah, but those smoky flavors are quite desirable”; a counter-counter comment pointed out that the chemistry of smoke particles also mess with yeasts vital to fermentation. On eucalyptus, one commenter mentioned Heitz (Napa) Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet, one of the most desirable of Napa’s “big reds,” widely known (and praised) for its distinctive eucalyptus aroma/flavor.

And if scientists find that indeed the aromas/flavors of cannabis will affect the aromas/flavors of wines, then what? Already a winery in Spain is bottling two blends — one red, one white — they’re calling Cannawine, infused with small amounts of cannabis sativa (50 mg of extract per barrel): “Two great pleasures are mixed,” they claim. In California, some brands are clandestinely producing “pot wine” for insiders only. A lot of people love wine, they say, and a lot of people love pot, so why not combine the two passions? A fine “party drink,” some say.

And what about hops, an essential ingredient in our favorite ales? It seems hops are part of the same family as cannabis, also producers of “volatile aromatics” that could affect near-by grapes; a prominent local winemaker recalls wines from California’s Carneros region which are distinguished by distinct hoppy flavors, not unpleasant but not really desirable in the best pinot noir. So? No hops farming near grapes? Who says?

Another recent headline: “Marijuana farm overruled by Yamhill County in favor of nearby winery,” in the June 2 *Oregonian*.

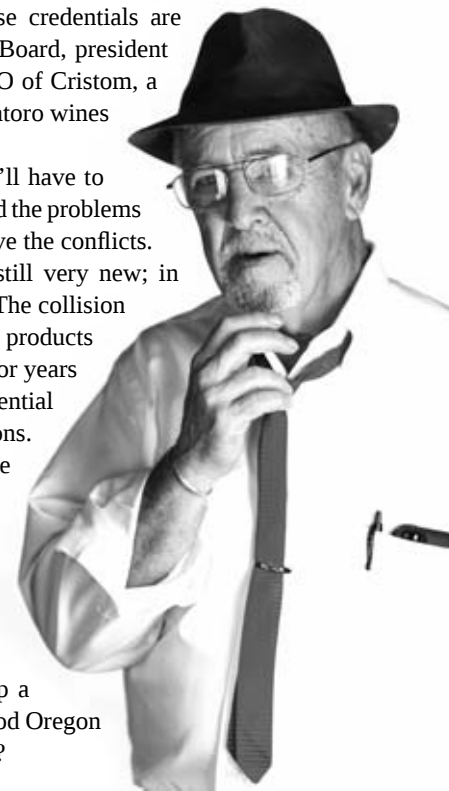
The lone dissenting vote came from Commissioner Mary Starrett, who said, “It really is like having to pick and choose what products or what farm crops we’re going to thumbs-up or thumbs-down.” In short, is this really a role we want played by government?

Probably the most carefully considered response I got for my inquiries came from Steve Thomson, whose credentials are impeccable: he’s chair of the Oregon Wine Board, president of the Oregon Winegrowers Association CEO of Cristom, a premium producer and makes his own Hannatoro wines in Walla Walla.

After some thought, Thomson says, “We’ll have to have some conversations and try to understand the problems then find the proper offsets” that might resolve the conflicts.

The cannabis/marijuana enterprises are still very new; in wine years, Oregon wine is also rather new. The collision of these two critical — and very valuable — products will engender issues that won’t be resolved for years — and that doesn’t take into account the potential actions of strongly anti-pot AG Jeff Sessions. Some indication of his attitudes might be seen in the DEA’s 2006 raid on (legal, in California) medical marijuana dispensaries. How will we respond if Sessions orders busts of Oregon (legal) growers and sellers? And how will our wine-makers and grape-growers respond?

Oops, 4:20 already? What to do? Fire up a blunt of Oregon skunk and glug a glass of good Oregon pinot noir? Who’s that pounding on the door?



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