

Gorge's wine success rooted in Wright's old vine legacy

Other vineyard owners call him mentor, advocate and friend

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

THE DALLES — The pump is on for the first time this season but things aren't working. Alejandro Rojas, Lonnie Wright's foreman and friend for 20 years at The Pines 1852 vineyard, says there isn't enough pressure to water the grapes up on the slope: the syrah, the merlot, the "Young Zin" and, of course, the Old Vine Zinfandel that grows at the heart of Lonnie's story.

Wright doesn't like what he's hearing. Truth is, he's fuming. He says there must be a leak in the system. He wants Rojas and two other employees to chop a path down to Mill Creek to see if there's a problem in the pipe down there.

Rojas demurs; he has other options to check first. And besides, he just had a bout with poison oak and doesn't savor crashing through brush to examine the creek pipe.

"You got a machete?" Wright asks. "I'll do it." And next thing he's rummaging through a tool shed, muttering, looking in vain for a machete and grabbing a couple of big clippers instead.

Daddy of wine in the Gorge

Wright, 67, bears the ruddy look of someone who works outdoors, with a thick mustache and salt and pepper hair swept back from his forehead. He's the acknowledged daddy of wine in the Columbia River Gorge, a pioneer on the level of the visionaries who made the Willamette Valley an internationally acclaimed producer of pinot noir.

He's planted, planned or consulted on hundreds of acres of vineyards on both sides of the river from Hood River east to Maryhill, Washington, a region that includes two American Viticultural Areas and produces robust reds, delicate whites and boasts of "a world of wine in 40 miles."

Other vineyard owners call him mentor, advocate and friend. In 2011, the Oregon Wine Board gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award. He was nominated by his peers.

But right now he's just another dirt farmer dealing with a dang problem. The issue is resolved a few minutes later when Rojas, the vineyard foreman, finds a closed valve on an irrigation well. Water soon flows to the drip lines strung through the legacy vines up on the hill, and Lonnie Wright is smiling again.

Gorge takes off

Columbia River Gorge wine is on a roll. Vineyards, wineries and tasting rooms dot the towns that line the river and now compete with orchard stands and brew pubs for tourists. Increasingly, the region is tapping the big Portland market on the shoulder and reminding wine lovers that Interstate 84 through the Gorge is a much quicker drive than creeping out Oregon 99W to the pinot noir vineyards of Yamhill County. An April "Portland Grand Tasting" held in the city's posh Pearl District was packed with people eager to sample gorge wines. In the meantime, Wine Press Northwest, an insider trade publication, named Hood River's Mount



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Lonnie Wright is considered the pioneer of Columbia Gorge wines, having planted or managed dozens of vineyards over the past 35 years. In 2011 he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Oregon Wine Board.

Hood Winery as its 2016 Oregon Winery of the Year.

The Gorge itself, a national scenic area known for its massive basalt formations and dazzling waterfalls, is part of the attraction and is key to the variety of wines grown in the region. The river bisects the spine of the Cascade Mountain Range, which divides Oregon and Washington state into western wet and eastern dry sides. Wine enthusiasts like to say the region loses an inch of rain with every mile traveled east.

The west side of the Hood River Valley gets 36 inches of precipitation annually, while only 15 inches falls in The Dalles and only 10 beyond that.

As a result, the region produces at least 40 types of wine from grapes that grow in a wide range of heat and water, from zinfandel, merlot and pinot noir to pinot gris, riesling and chardonnay.

For winemakers, the Gorge represents the "blessing and challenge" of a diverse American Viticultural Area, said Mark Chien, program coordinator of the Oregon Wine Research Institute at Oregon State University.

"They are well on their way to making great wine," Chien said. "It's sort of like where the Willamette Valley was 25 years ago: You figure out what the heck you've got and what to do about it."

Vineyard revival

That might have been Lonnie Wright's line 34 years ago as he stood on a slope above Mill Creek a few miles southwest of The Dalles. He'd heard — through the grapevine, if you will — that an orchardist planned to revive an 8-acre, century-old zinfandel vineyard that had been abandoned for about 20 years. Wright showed up unbidden at 7 a.m. and found the orchardist literally reading from a University of California-Davis pruning textbook.

Wright grew up in Indiana, where he earned a scholarship and played guard on Butler University's basketball team and figured he'd most likely teach and coach hoops. But the call of the road eventually led by way of Central Amer-

ica to the Pacific Northwest, where in 1978 he found himself part of a crew planting the first vineyards at Columbia Crest, a winery owned by Chateau Ste. Michelle in Paterson, Washington. He learned he had a knack for the work, soaked up information, became a manager and supervised the first harvest.

The road called again, however, and he went off for the first of two trips to Libya to install irrigation systems — adventures that seem crazy given the current state of affairs in the Middle East. In 1982 he was back in the Gorge, starting a family with his wife, Linda, and the idea of getting in on the start of reviving the old vineyard appealed to him.

The rest is Gorge lore. The long-neglected vineyard apparently is among the oldest in the Pacific Northwest. Wright learned it was planted by a stonemason, Louis Comini, probably between 1890 and 1900. Comini also made the headstones placed at the local Catholic cemetery, built a couple of stone houses in The Dalles and worked on The Grotto, a Catholic shrine in Portland.

Early photos, one dated 1910, show the Old Zin vines weren't grown on a trellis system but were "head-trained on the ground," essentially grown like low bushes. The method provided protection against freezing but left grapes susceptible to bunch rot.

Wright revitalized the Old Vine Zin and eventually bought the vineyard and adjoining property, which among other iterations had once been a dairy. Today the wine made from the old block is highly praised by connoisseurs and sells for \$35 a bottle at The Pines 1852 tasting room Wright opened in Hood River.

He also started a "Young Zin" block from Old Zin cuttings 25 years ago, and planted merlot and syrah grapes as well. In 1983 he planted a chardonnay vineyard for a neighbor along Mill Creek, veterinarian and beef cattle rancher Terry McDuffee. From that first job, he emerged as the go-to consultant, cheerleader and vineyard manager among people likewise drawn to the prospects of growing grapes and making wine in the dramatic landscape framed by the Columbia River, Mount Hood and Mount Adams.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Bottles of Old Vine Zinfandel and Pinot Gris await customers at the The Pines 1852 tasting room in Hood River. Hostess Liz Marable is in the background.

'Guru' to ask

Bob Morus, president of Phelps Creek Vineyards in Hood River, tells a familiar story. Arriving in the Gorge in the late 1980s, he learned Wright was the "guru" to ask about starting a vineyard.

Wright "came up to the place and kicked the dirt," and asked Morus what type of grapes he wanted to grow. Morus answered pinot noir, then becoming Oregon's signature grape.

"I suppose we can do that," Wright drawled, but he cautioned that he'd not planted pinot noir before. Wright and his crew planned and planted the first 8 acres. Phelps Creek has expanded over the years and its wines enjoy a sterling reputation with reviewers.

"He got me going and we've remained friends ever since," Morus said. He jokes that he eventually had to "fire" Wright "because I needed to make my own mistakes."

A break came when King Estates of Eugene, one of the state's largest and most prominent wineries, came looking for grapes. Wright was friends with the late Brad Biehl, King Estates' viticulturist, and introduced him to Morus and others who became King's suppliers.

"The combination of Brad and Lonnie really bootstrapped grape growing in the Gorge," Morus said. The company liked what it found and paid promptly, critical to the beginning Gorge vineyards.

"All those formative years sucked us into growing more grapes," Morus said with a laugh. "It really helped us get established."

Morus said Wright also pressed for recognition of the Gorge within Oregon's wine industry.

"He's such a strong advocate for grapes in the Gorge," he said. "It was really a struggle to get the Oregon Wine Board to recognize people were growing grapes somewhere other than in the Willamette Valley."

"When they write the history of the Gorge, they'll need to talk about Lonnie."

THE DAILY
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TV LISTINGS

Evening listings
WEDNESDAY

WEDNESDAY EVENING												A - Charter Astoria/Seaside - L - Charter Long Beach		JUNE 1	
A	L	6 PM	6:30	7 PM	7:30	8 PM	8:30	9 PM	9:30	10 PM	10:30	11 PM	11:30		
2	KATU	(2) KATU News at 6		Jeopardy!	Wheel of Fortune	500 Questions (SF) (N)		Modern Family	The Goldbergs	KATU News at 11	(35) Jimmy Kimmel				
3	KOMO	(4) KOMO 4 News		Wheel of Fortune	Jeopardy!	500 Questions (SF) (N)		Modern Family	The Goldbergs	KOMO 4 News	(35) Jimmy Kimmel				
4	KING	(5) NBC Nightly News	KING 5 News	KING 5 News	Evening	American Ninja Warrior "Los Angeles Qualifier" (SP) (N)		Shift "Time's They Are a-Changin'" (N)		KING 5 News	(35) Tonight Show				
6	KOIN	(6) KOIN 6 News at 6	CBS Evening News	Extra	Ent. Tonight	Undercover Boss		Criminal Minds "Entropy"		KOIN 6 News @ 11	(35) S. Colbert				
7	KIRO	(7) KIRO 7 News	CBS Evening News	The Insider	Ent. Tonight	Undercover Boss		Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders		KIRO News @ 11	(35) S. Colbert				
8	KGW	(8) KGW News at 6:00 p.m.		Live at Seven	Inside Edition	American Ninja Warrior "Los Angeles Qualifier" (SP) (N)		Shift "Time's They Are a-Changin'" (N)		KGW News at 11	(35) Tonight Show				
9	KRCW	(9) Seinfeld	Seinfeld	Modern Family	Modern Family	iHeartRadio Summer Pool Party (N)		Supernatural		KGW News at 10	(35) Two 1/2 Men	(05) King of Hill			
10	KOPB	(10) Journeys in Japan	Business (N)	PBS NewsHour		Nova "Hubble's 25th Anniversary"		Genius "What Are We?" (N)		Genius "Where Are We?" (N)		Independent Lens	"The New Black"		
12	KPTV	(12) 6 O'Clock News		Portland Timbers	MLS Soccer Portland	Timbers at San Jose Earthquakes (L)		Portland Timbers		10 O'Clock News		11 O'Clock News	(35) Chef (SP) (N)		
13	KPDx	(13) Mike & Molly	Mike & Molly	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	FOX 12's 8 O'Clock News on PDX-TV		FOX 12's 9 O'Clock News on PDX-TV		The Closer "The Life"		The Closer "Make Over"			
14	KCPQ	(14) (5:00) MLS Soccer Sea/Wash (L)		Post-Match	Big Bang Theory	Chef "Battle for a White Apron" (SP) (N)		Wayward Pines "Blood Harvest" (N)		Q13 News at 10		Q13 News	Modern Family		
20	TBS	(20) Seinfeld	Seinfeld	Seinfeld	Seinfeld	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Conan			
22	KZJZ	(22) Two and a Half	Two and a Half	The Simpsons	The Simpsons	Modern Family	Modern Family	Q13 News at 9		Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Friends	Friends		
29	ESPN	(29) (5:00) MLB Baseball	Los Angeles Dodgers at Chicago Cubs (L)			SportsCenter		SportsCenter		SportsCenter		SportsCenter			
30	ESPN2	(30) (5:00) 30 for 30		SportsCenter		NBA Finals "Preview"		Baseball Tonight (L)		NFL Live		Jalen & Jacoby (N)	MLB Baseball		
31	NICK	(31) SpongeBob	Henry Danger	Henry Danger	The Thundermans	The Thundermans	NickyRickyDicky	Full House 1/2	Full House 2/2	Full House	Full House	Friends	Friends		
32	DISN	(32) Austin & Ally	Liv and Maddie	Stuck in Middle	K.C. Undercover	★★ Spy Kids 3D: Game Over ('03) Antonio Banderas.		Liv and Maddie		Stuck in Middle	Friends Whenever	K.C. Undercover	Austin & Ally		
34	FAM	(34) ★★ Paul Blart: Mall Cop ('09, Comedy)	Keir O'Donnell, Jayma Mays, Kevin James.			Young (SP) (N)	Baby Daddy (N)	★★ Bring It On (2000, Comedy)	Jesse Bradford, Eliza Dushku, Kirsten Dunst.	★★★ Prisoners (2013, Thriller)	Jake Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, Hugh Jackman.		The 700 Club		
35	FMC	(35) Movie	(55) ★★ Total Recall (2012, Action)	Bokeem Woodbine, Bryan Cranston, Colin Farrell.				(15) FXM Presents	★★★ Prisoners (2013, Thriller)	Jake Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, Hugh Jackman.		(20) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4			
36	LIFE	(36) (5:00) Roots "Part 1" Pt. 1 of 4		Roots "Part 2" Kunta fathers a woman who will believe in freedom. Pt. 2 of 4				Roots "Part 3" George wishes to buy his family's freedom but is sold. Pt. 3 of 4 (N)		(20) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4		(20) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4			
38	ROOT	(38) Mariners Access	MarinersPre-game	MLB Baseball Seattle Mariners at San Diego Padres Site: Petco Park -- San Diego, Calif. (L)				Post-game		MLS Soccer San Jose Earthquakes at Portland Timbers		TUF Talk	Fox Sports Live		
39	F51	(39) Ultimate Fighter 23 "The Situation"		TUF 23 "No Easy Fight" (N)		TUF Talk (N)	Fox Sports Live	Garbage Time (N)	TMZ Sports (N)	Ultimate Fighter 23 "No Easy Fight"		TUF Talk	Fox Sports Live		
43	SPIKE	(43) (5:30) ★★ The Chronicles of Riddick ('04)	Judi Dench, Colm Feore, Vin Diesel.		★★★ X2: X-Men United (2003, Sci-Fi)	Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart.						The Craziest ('10) Timothy Olyphant.			
44	COM	(44) (15) Futurama	(50) Futurama	(20) Futurama	(50) South Park	(25) South Park	"The Entity"	South Park	South Park	South Park	South Park	The Daily Show	The Nightly Show		
45	HIST	(45) (5:00) Roots "Part 1" Pt. 1 of 4		Roots "Part 2" Kunta fathers a woman who will believe in freedom. Pt. 2 of 4				Roots "Part 3" George wishes to buy his family's freedom but is sold. Pt. 3 of 4 (N)		(20) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4		(05) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4			
46	A&E	(46) (5:00) Roots "Part 1" Pt. 1 of 4		Roots "Part 2" Kunta fathers a woman who will believe in freedom. Pt. 2 of 4				Roots "Part 3" George wishes to buy his family's freedom but is sold. Pt. 3 of 4		(05) Roots "Part 3" Pt. 3 of 4		Transgender Kids Camp	Transgender Kids Camp		
47	TLC	(47) Conjoined Twins: Miracle Separation		My 40-Year-Old Child "A New Case"		Transgender Kids		Transgender Kids Camp (N)		Jazz "The Family Tells All Updated" (N)		Transgender Kids Camp	Transgender Kids Camp		
48	DISC	(48) Bering Sea Gold "Teamwork"		Bering Sea Gold "Turf War"		Bering Sea Gold "All In"		Bering Sea Gold "Jackpot" (SF) (N)		To Be Announced		Bering Sea Gold "Jackpot"	Bering Sea Gold "Jackpot"		
49	NGEO	(49) The Yard "Houseboat SOS"		Southern Justice "Gun to the Head"		Southern Justice "Southern Ruckus"		Justice "Truth or Consequences" (N)		The Yard "Sparks Fly" (N)		Southern Justice "Truth or Consequences"	Southern Justice "Truth or Consequences"		
50	TNT	(50) Castle "Once Upon a Time in the West"		Castle "Kill Switch"		Castle "Last Action Hero"		Castle "Bad Santa"		Castle "Castle, P.I."		Castle "Private Eye Caramba!"	Castle "Private Eye Caramba!"		
51	AMC	(51) (5:00) ★★ The Hurt Locker ('09) Anthony Mackie, Guy Pearce, Jeremy Renner.		★★ Black Hawk Down (2001, Action)	Eric Bana, Ewan McGregor, Josh Hartnett.			Law & Order: SVU "Jersey Breakdown"		Law & Order: SVU "Betrayal's Climax"		Royal Pains "Fly Me to Knowlton" (N)	Law & Order: SVU "Merchandise"		
52	USA	(52) Law & Order: S.V.U. "Users"		Law & Order: S.V.U. "Anchor"		Law & Order: SVU "Jersey Breakdown"		Cutthroat Kitchen (N)		Cutthroat Kitchen (N)		Food Fight	Food Fight		
53	FOOD	(53) Cutthroat Kitchen		Cutthroat Kitchen		Cutthroat Kitchen		Brother vs. "Nice, Nice Baby" (N)		House Hunters	House Hunters (N)	Listed Sisters "Room to Grow" (N)	Listed Sisters "Room to Grow" (N)		
54	HGTV	(54) Property Brothers		Property Brothers		Property Brothers		House Hunters	House Hunters (N)	Listed Sisters "Room to Grow" (N)		Americans "A Roy Rogers in Franconia"	Americans "A Roy Rogers in Franconia"		
55	FX	(55) (5:00) Non-Stop (2014, Thriller)	Julianne Moore, Liam Neeson.	World War Z (2013, Action)	Mireille Enos, Daniella Kertesz, Brad Pitt.			The Americans (N)		A. Cooper 360 "Trump Town Hall"		CNN Tonight With Don Lemon	CNN Tonight With Don Lemon		
57	CNN	(57) Anderson Cooper 360		CNN Tonight With Don Lemon		CNN Tonight With Don Lemon		Anderson Cooper 360		The Kelly File With Megyn Kelly		On the Record	On the Record		
58	FNC	(58) The Kelly File With Megyn Kelly		Hannity		The O'Reilly Factor		Shark Tank		Lives-Super Rich	Lives-Super Rich	Paid Program	Paid Program		
61	CNBC	(61) Shark Tank		Super Rich (N)	Lives-Super Rich	Lives-Super Rich		Shark Tank		Lives-Super Rich	Lives-Super Rich	Paid Program	Paid Program		
63	BRAV	(63) The Real Housewives "Tipping Point"		Housewives "Airing Your Dirty Laundry"		New York City Social (N)		The Real Housewives (N)		Mother "Are You My Baby-Daddy?" (N)		Wives "December: Berkshires County"	Wives "December: Berkshires County"		
64	TCM	(64) (5:00) ★★ Long Day's Journey Into Night ('62) Katharine Hepburn.		★★★ Our Town (1940, Drama)	William Holden, A.J. Craven.	(45) ★★ Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? ('66, Dra)	Richard Burton, George Segal, Elizabeth Taylor.								
65	SYFY	(65) Movie	★★★ The Mummy (1999, Adventure)	Rachel Weisz, John Hannah, Brendan Fraser.		★★★ The Mummy Returns (2001, Adventure)	Rachel Weisz, John Hannah, Brendan Fraser.								
69	RFD	(69) WesternSport		Noble Outfitters	HS Rodeo Tour	Equestrian Nation	RW Horsemanship	Rural Eve. News	Women's Rodeo	The Final Spin	WesternSport	Noble Outfitters	Product Showcase		

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