

Northwest wines struggle amid virus

Grapes ripen without demand

By ANNA KING
Northwest News Network

Many Northwest wine tastings for groups are done over Zoom nowadays.

At Fidélitas in southeast Washington state, winemaker and owner Charlie Hoppes explains some of his favorite flavors in a video for wine club members with his son:

“We always seem to get that little bit of dustiness in this wine, that we talk about from Red Mountain,” Hoppes said.

The sales generated from this video tasting with patrons is important. It’s one of the key ways wineries can reach their customers right now during the coronavirus pandemic. Tasting rooms and restaurants have been closed. Events are canceled.

Beyond the dearth of traditional wine sales, there’s a surge of juice coming this harvest.

Across the Northwest, there are too many wine grapes and not enough demand. It started with an overly optimistic industry planting too much. Then came the coronavirus.

Now, vineyard managers and wineries are being forced to think creatively to cope with 2020’s bumper crop.

“I can’t remember it ever being like this,” Hoppes said. “I think it’s going to take four or five years for a big correction to kind of happen.”

It’s so bad that several winemakers who work with Hoppes have told him they’re just skipping the 2020 vintage.

Drip, drip

Just up the hill on Red Mountain, Dick Boushey inspects the drip irrigation at Longwinds Vineyard. The black tubing runs along the rows and precisely drops water at the base of each vine. The water makes tiny pools that reflect the morning light. The dripping water creates a tiny symphony of plinking.

Bouchey said the problem starts here with a glut of wine grapes.

“I’ve been farming for 40 years and I’ve seen this happen a few times,” Bouchey said. “Not this dramatic.”

Boushey grows some of the highest-valued grapes in the state: Red Mountain cabernet.

But several wineries that normally buy Boushey’s fruit have canceled their orders, leaving his valuable grapes hanging on the vine.

Boushey estimates there are nearly 10,000 surplus acres of grapes in Washington state.

“I always thought I was in a pretty secure place,” Bouchey said. “We sell to 50 different wineries. Well, all 50 are kind of struggling (now).”

Dropping fruit

Even the biggest players are getting a bit crushed.

Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, based in Woodinville, Washington, is one of the country’s giant premium winemakers. The company owns about 3,900 acres across Washington, Oregon and California, and contracts about another 27,000 acres across those three states.

Kevin Corliss is Ste. Michelle’s vice president of vineyards. He said this year, the company actually paid its Washington growers to drop fruit on the ground.

“We had 100% of them respond by doing things that reduced their crop and enhanced the quality,” Corliss said.

At Long Shadows in Walla Walla, Washington, Gilles Nicault and his team are bot-



Anna King/Northwest News Network

Cabernet sauvignon hangs on Red Mountain almost ready to pick. Many wine grape growers worry there are too many grapes this year for the market.

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Charlie Hoppes | winemaker and owner of Fidélitas

ting a 2018 merlot. It’s a deafening rattle-and-clink cacophony that fills up the large winery. But there’s uncertainty about the 2020 vintage.

“What’s difficult is right now we don’t know how long COVID is going to be with us. I know that it’s there, and we have to react to it,” Nicault said.

Pinot pickle

While much of the Northwest is awash in wine grapes, too much spring rain in Oregon has created the opposite problem: there’s a shortage of Willamette Valley’s famous pinot noir grapes.

Tom Danowski, president of the Oregon Wine Board, said most growers in Oregon are down some 5% to 20% in crop because of a cool June. That’s when grapes bloom and set their fruit. He says that natural thinning will help soften the effects of oversupply and the way COVID-19 has rattled the restaurant, resort and tasting room markets.

“In a market that is down from COVID, most people are not looking at a catastrophe, but there will be slightly more grape tonnage looking for a home this year,” Danowski said.

The latest Nielsen data suggests that wine sales in grocery stores are up over last year and that consumers are looking to buy increasing amounts of high-quality (or higher-priced) bottles.

As a result, Moore said the smaller wineries are hesitant to buy even their regular grapes this fall.

Eugenia Keegan heads Oregon’s Jackson Family Wines. She said having a lean harvest isn’t such a big problem given how COVID-19 is depressing sales.

“So this is a really lovely balancing of nature right here. I think we will be at a perfect equilibrium,” Keegan said.

The grape glut in much of the Northwest is forcing some wineries to think in terms of lower-price-point second labels — wines that consumers can drink soon after they’re made, instead of age in the barrel for three years.

And that may be a silver lining for wine lovers looking for pandemic deals. So consumers might watch for some bargain-priced, high-quality 2020 reds, rosés and whites.

Hard truths on his hard drive

Dear Annie: I’ve been with “Robby” for three years. I just moved in with him a few weeks ago, and I’ve been discovering some unpleasant surprises while using his computer. First, I found some racy photos saved on his hard drive. Then, I saw in his browser history that he’d been on dating sites and saw that he’d been emailing with people from dating websites, too. I asked him about it. He denies having done any of that and says he doesn’t know how that stuff got on his computer and email. But the proof is right there. I don’t know what to do. I don’t trust him, but I love him so much. Please help me. — *So Confused and Hurt*

Dear So Confused: Is it possible someone has been logging onto his computer and planting incriminating photos and emails? Theoretically, sure. But it’s incredibly unlikely. And it’s no wonder you’re confused; Robby has done nothing to help you understand. Unless and until he can tell you the truth and work to make it right by you, start packing those boxes back up.

Dear Annie: I’ve been dating my boyfriend for two years now. We each have children from prior marriages. We have a good relationship, but he is such a momma’s boy — which is OK, to a certain point, but in his case, it seems excessive. He is in his 40s and still lives with his mother. He’s said he will not leave his mother’s house because she has some health problems and needs him. Yet, she manages to work a full-time, 40-hour-a-week job.

I feel as if I’m always competing with his mother. Just one small example: Let’s say he has a stain on his shirt. I’ll say something like, “Shout works well for that.” He’ll say, “Well, my mom said Spray ‘n Wash works better, so I’ll just get that.”



ANNE LANE
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I feel like we will never be able to come together as one family, with my kids and his kids, because he won’t leave his mom’s. He doesn’t come over to my place too often because he’s busy helping her. It’s not like I live hours away from him. It’s only a 30-minute drive.

Several times now, I’ve asked him about moving in with me, and all he says is “I’m not moving right now.” What should I do: Stick it out or leave him and his mama? — *Girlfriend to a Momma’s Boy*

Dear Girlfriend: It’s noble of your boyfriend to care so much for his mother. It’s understandable of you to be frustrated that he’s less available to you. Neither of you is wrong. But you might be wrong for each other. He’s made it abundantly clear that caring for his mom is at the top of his list of priorities. Even if you were somehow able to talk him out of that, he’d resent you for it. So, if the situation isn’t working for you as it is now, it might never work for you.

Dear Annie: I am writing in response to “Deeply Depressed,” the person who cries about sad things that happen to others. I want to say that she is likely an empath. I strongly suggest she look up resources out there for helping empaths. Judith Orloff’s books are an excellent resource, and Orloff runs a Facebook group for empaths. If “Depressed” goes online and gets plugged into these resources, she will connect with others who have very similar reactions to the sadness of others. It will be a relief for her. — *Lea R.*

Dear Lea: Thank you for sharing these resources. I’ve heard good things about Judith Orloff’s books, especially “The Empath’s Survival Guide.”

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