



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Hampton Lumber has diversified into the wine industry with investments in vineyards and a winemakers' studio.

Hampton Lumber expands business into wine industry

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The potential for wildfires and stricter regulations has convinced an Oregon timber company to dip its toe into the wine industry.

Hampton Lumber has bought the Carlton Winemakers Studio from its founders for an undisclosed sum, building on earlier vineyard investments in Polk and Yamhill counties.

The studio operates as an incubator for independent winemakers who use the facility's equipment and sell products through its tasting room.

It was founded in 2002 by Eric Hamacher and Luisa Ponzi, who hailed from the wine industry, with the help of builders Ned and Kirsten Lumpkin.

The investment made more sense for Hampton than buying or developing a winery, which would entail specialized marketing expertise and holding several years worth of inventory, said Steve Zika, the company's CEO.

"This is a nice logical step where we could tip-toe into the next step," Zika said. "It's a really interesting way to get further into the industry."

The opportunity for growth in Oregon's forest products industry is limited due to wildfire danger and likely regulatory changes on private lands, he said.

Timber companies are negotiating with environmental groups and Gov. Kate

Brown's office on a potential "habitat conservation plan" for federally protected species on private lands, he said.

Vineyards and wine-making offer an opportunity to diversify for Hampton Lumber, though the timber industry will remain its main focus, Zika said. The company owns 280,000 acres of forestland in Oregon and Washington and operates 10 mills along the West Coast, including one in Warrenton.

Earlier this year, Hampton roughly doubled its timberland holdings with the purchase of 145,000 acres in northwest Washington from the Weyerhaeuser Co. for about \$265 million.

Hampton entered the wine industry in 2016, when it planted a property near Monmouth with grapevines in anticipation of a land sale that ultimately fell through.

The company held on to the vineyard and bought another one near Carlton two years later. Grapes from the two properties, which total about 130 acres, are sold to eight wineries in the area.

The wine industry may present opportunities for members of the Hampton family who want to pursue career paths outside the timber industry, Zika said. The family's involvement in timber stretches 80 years and four generations.

Since it's not a publicly held firm with a narrow focus, Hampton is flexible to make unique investments, he said. "We can do things like that in terms of fun as a private company."

Oregon man overcomes regulatory hurdles to sell ryegrass

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — While studying how to convert straw into fuel, Chris Beatty got the chance to learn a lot about the ryegrass plant.

Although the interest in such biofuels evaporated with the advent of fracking and the availability of cheap natural gas, Beatty decided he could still put that knowledge to use in his next venture — Spiritopia, an artisan distilled spirits producer.

When ryegrass is preparing to grow seed heads, it's "driving sugars up the plant" that can be directly fermented into alcohol, he said. "I thought, wow, this would make a really interesting component for a whiskey."

Getting his ryegrass whiskey into the hands of consumers would prove anything but simple, however, as Spiritopia first had to navigate a "regulatory hell or purgatory."

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, a federal agency that regulates labels, was unsure whether ryegrass was fit for human consumption and referred the question to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"I thought there were going to be issues but I did not see that one coming," Beatty said.

The FDA, in turn, informed Beatty that he'd have to complete a toxicological study to prove that distilled ryegrass spirits are safe.

"It takes a lot of time and money, of which I had neither," he said.

Beatty was leaning toward shelving the idea until a magazine devoted to artisan spirits caught wind of his dilemma and published an article about it. That compelled a fellow chemist to notify Spiritopia that FDA had already approved an anti-allergy medication made with ryegrass.

"With that information, I was able to get ryegrass approved as an ingredient," Beatty said. "So, it was rather dumb luck."

After further negotiations with the federal government over the label, Spiritopia finally released its ryegrass whiskey in time for Christmas in 2018 — about three years after initially applying for permission.

Beatty said he must regularly explain that ryegrass whiskey is different from rye whiskey, which is made from fermented rye grain. Rye tends to add spicy and peppery flavors to alcohol, while ryegrass makes it softer and earthier.

However, his company does eventu-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Chris Beatty, founder of the Spiritopia distilled spirits company, holds a bottle of ryegrass whiskey.

ally want to experiment with making whiskey from ryegrass seeds instead of from the grass. That way, the product could be produced at any time during the year instead of immediately after the grass is cut in late April or early May at about 12-18 inches.

Spiritopia generally produces about 500 bottles a year of ryegrass whiskey, which are sold for \$40 each at its distillery tasting room in Corvallis. Each annual batch requires less than an acre of ryegrass, for which a local farmer receives "liquid compensation."

The bulk of the "mash" that's fermented and distilled into ryegrass whiskey is corn and barley, while ryegrass makes up about 25% of the biomass, Beatty said. The ryegrass represents only a few percentage points of the finished alcohol, since the other ingredients have more fermentable sugars.

"It's more about the flavor it imparts to the whiskey than the alcohol contribution," he said.

Aside from ryegrass whiskey, Spiritopia uses locally sourced apples, grapes, peppermint and other crops in its products, and is planning to release a pear brandy as well.

"We tend to do less sugar and a more intense flavor of whatever it is," he said.

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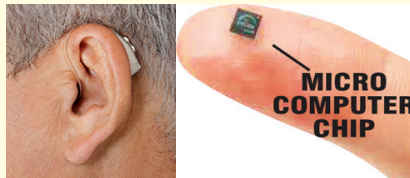
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