

Wine Industry. Blossoming *in* Skagit County

FORMER HOBBYISTS GROWING GRAPES,
ATTRACTING TOURISTS

Story by Rachel Robertson
Photography by Scott Terrell

Are there wines in Skagit County? What the local wine industry wants people to know is: Yes, there are! And it is an industry that is coming on strong.

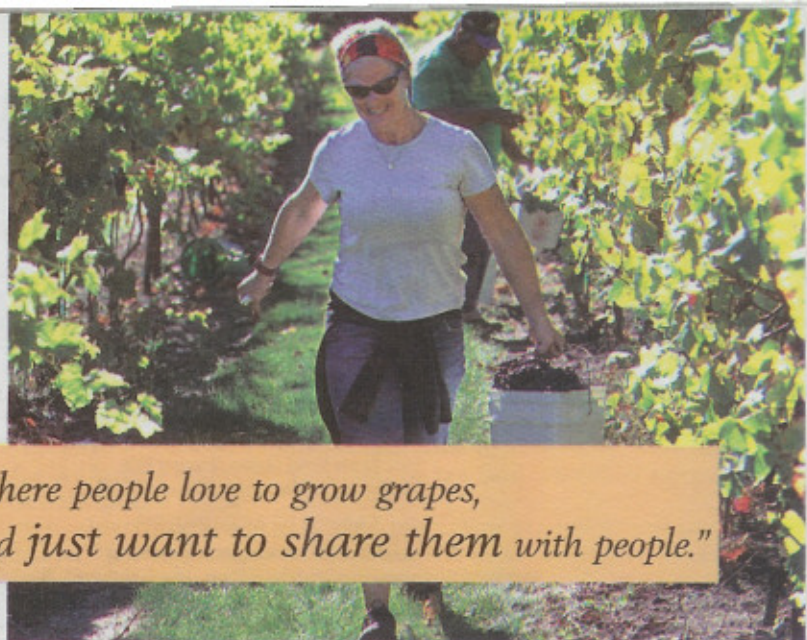
Although Washington is the second largest producer of wines in the country, the majority of the wine grapes are grown in Eastern Washington (90 percent from the Columbia Valley American Viticulture Area), where warmer summers contribute to ideal conditions for popular varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, and Syrah. Although many of the local wineries buy grapes from the other side of the Cascade Mountains to produce their wines, a movement to grow grapes locally is garnering community support. The hope is that not only will wine grape production help the future of agriculture in the region, but also promote tourism. With the value of the wine industry to the state's economy estimated at \$3 billion annually, it's no wonder that regional grape growers and wineries are excited about the possibilities.

HISTORY OF WINES IN SKAGIT

Pasek Cellars of Mount Vernon is the undisputed leader for wines in Skagit. In 1995, they became the first licensed winery in Skagit County and they continue to be the largest, producing 15,000 cases annually—more than all the other wineries combined. The total wine production for Skagit County is 25,000 cases. Skagit's wines have also won numerous awards and produced the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival wine for the last nine years—this year's wines are Tulip Red (a Merlot and Cabernet blend), Cranberry, and Blackberry.

Pasek's specialty is fruit wines, but it was serendipity that forged that avenue. "I think most winemakers, including myself, got into wine making to make great red wine," says Gene Pasek, co-owner of Pasek Cellars. "But then the cold reality of having to make a living sets in, and in 1996 there was a disastrous harvest ... And being a new kid on the block, I couldn't get grapes."

Jeff Hammer, Carpenter Creek Winery



"These are family-owned wineries where people love to grow grapes, love to make high quality wine, and just want to share them with people."

**-THOMAS BOUCHER Executive Director
SKAGIT VALLEY WINE ASSOCIATION**

When the recipes for making fruit wines at home were not turning out very well, Pasek "threw those out the door," and started doing his own experimentation. He says, "I made 60 to 70 different wines a year. I made blackberry ten different ways with all different variables ... I just started perfecting things."

The hard work paid off. "Fruit wines have gotten kind of a bad name over the years because no one ever really made them very well," Pasek says. "Our philosophy was to put an extra dollar or two into each bottle and make it as good as you could make it, and it turns out people don't mind spending a couple extra bucks if they know they are getting the best. So, we have slowly cornered most of the fruit market [in this area]." Pasek explains that over the years the winery grew from being viewed as a local winery, to a Washington winery, and now as a Pacific Northwest winery.

Pasek also makes wines from grapes grown in Yakima Valley, but is not interested in having his own vineyard. "It's hard enough just making [the wine]," he says.

But research by Washington State University (WSU) is helping other local wineries do just that. In fact, many of them largely credit Gary Moulton, who heads the fruit horticulture department at WSU's Mount Vernon Northwest Washington Research and Extension Center, with making wine grape growing possible in this area. Continuing the work of his predecessor Bob Norton (who identified some varieties such as Siegerrebe in the late 1970s that could grow in this area), Moulton has spent the last 16 years testing some red wine grapes and experimenting with different rootstocks on which to grow the grapes. It is necessary to graft grape plants onto rootstocks that are resistant to virus

infection and an aphid-like insect (phylloxera) which can destroy the roots of grape plants. Additionally, some rootstocks help promote early ripening of the fruit, which is important in cooler climates such as Western Washington.

"The image has been that you can't grow grapes in Western Washington," Moulton says. "But the fact of the matter is we actually mirror a lot of the areas in some of the better wine producing areas in the world." Specifically, Moulton mentions Burgundy and Normandy in France and some southwestern areas of Germany. He says, "You certainly can grow some very, very nice grapes here ... we're going to have the unique varieties but we're going to have some standard wines as well." Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc are some of the more commonly known varieties that Moulton feels will do well here; Siegerrebe, (a German variety similar to Gewürztraminer), and Agria (a Hungarian variety) are some lesser known grapes that are already being grown and produced into wine in the Skagit Valley.

WORKING TOGETHER TO PROMOTE GROWTH

Rather than drive out competitors, area wineries hope to encourage more people to join them. "I don't think it's a pie," says Jeff Hammer of Carpenter Creek Winery. "I think it's a river, and the more tributaries we have feeding the stream the better the flow for everybody."

To that end, area wineries recently formed the Skagit Valley Wine Association. "Our big focus is to promote the wine industry: to promote the wineries, to support the grape growers, and really make this blossoming market

a key location for tourism," says Thomas Boucher, executive director of the new association.

At the group's first meeting in February, members agreed their immediate goals are to establish a Web site for education and promotion and to create a wine route through the Skagit area that directs tourists not only to the wineries, but also to other local businesses along the way, and allows visitors to see "the full spectrum of what Skagit County has to offer," says Boucher.

Boutique wineries—producing less than 1,000 cases a year—is how Boucher and Moulton characterize most of the wineries in the area. "These are not wineries that are looking to be the next Chateau Ste. Michelle," Boucher says. "These are family-owned wineries where people love to grow grapes, love to make high quality wine, and just want to share them with people."

Many owners started making wine as a hobby, but then it grew into something more. For retired plumbing contractor Steve Olsen, owning Glacier Peak Winery in Rockport is not about making money. "If we break even we're happy," he says with a laugh. "It's something to do, and it's fun, and there is a lot to learn about it." Having a self-described "green thumb," Olsen wanted to try his hand at growing his own grapes too, and their first harvest of Siegerrebe, Agria, and Pinot Noir blossomed in 2005. His wife, Susan, has found her niche at the winery. "My wife just loves the tasting room, she just loves to talk to everybody," he says.

Before Jeff Hammer bought Carpenter Creek Winery in Mount Vernon, he enjoyed making small batches of wine at home that he gave to friends and family, but his production

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LOCAL WINERIES STRUT THEIR STUFF...

PASEK CELLARS

Cranberry Wine: Silver Medal, Tri-Cities Wine Festival (Washington) 2004, Silver Medal, Finger Lakes International Wine Competition 2004
 Blackberry Dessert Wine (375ml): Gold Medal Best in Class, Pacific Rim International Wine Competition April 2005
 Gold Medal, Finger Lakes International Wine Competition April 2005
 Best in Class, Pacific Rim International Wine Competition April 2005
 Blackberry Wine (750ml): Gold Medal, Finger Lakes International Wine Competition 2004
 Raspberry Dessert Wine (375ml): Gold Medal, LA County Fair Wine Competition 2004
 Raspberry Wine (750ml): Gold Medal, Finger Lakes International Wine Competition 2004
 Syrah Port (500ml): Silver Medal, Central WA State Fair Summer 2004

CARPENTER CREEK WINERY

Semillon Ice Wine: Gold Medal, Capital Food and Wine 2005 & 2006
 Riesling: Silver Medal, Capital Food and Wine 2006, Silver Medal, Mason County Fair Wine Competition 2006
 Bronze Medal, Enological Society 2006
 Semillon: Bronze Medal, Enological Society 2005

SAMISH ISLAND WINERY

Island Blend (Blackberry, Blueberry, Strawberry)
 Silver Medal, Washington State Wine Competition - Central Washington State Fair 2002
 Blueberry Wine: Bronze Medal, Washington State Wine Competition - Central Washington State Fair 2002

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kept escalating. "When I brought home a forklift to move some barrels around, my wife said, 'It's a little out of hand—it's not a hobby anymore,'" he says. They became a commercial winery in 2001 and have continued to increase their production to where they now are the second biggest producer in Skagit County with 2,300 cases a year. Although his wines are mostly from Yakima Valley grapes, Hammer has also started growing his own grapes and is excited to release their first estate wine this spring, a sparkling Siegerrebe.

Although Hammer is now making his living with winemaking, he still obviously takes great pleasure in it. "It's a fabulous industry ... Just making people smile, and introducing them to some wines, and getting people excited about a local grown product ... It's a fun business to be in." Situated near Little Mountain with Carpenter Creek running through the back of the property, they also have some beautiful land to enjoy. He and his wife, Tara, are working on making improvements to the property so they can host outdoor events such as weddings in the future.

Doug Spady was not a hobby winemaker, but when he saw a for-sale advertisement for Challenger Ridge Vineyard and Cellars in Concrete, he thought it would be a fun business opportunity and started e-mailing people he knew to find other investors. The eight owners hired Randy Bonaventura as their winemaker, and Spady along with Ryan Costanti manages the winery. Already planted with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, they were able to salvage the harvest after buying the winery in August of last year and make their first wine. Bonaventura also plans on buying Eastern Washington grapes to expand their wines to include Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Pinot Gris, Viognier, and some blends.

"We all want to enjoy the property, make good wine, and have some fun with the community," says Spady. They also have some plans for development, putting in a 12-lot subdivision that Costanti describes as "winery bungalows," where Bonaventura and the owners can stay, but also in the future provide suites for visitors. Costanti says that they are not interested in making huge amounts of wine to be shipped around the country. Instead, their focus, he says, is "more driven to our customer base and being

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more one-on-one with them." He hopes people will come to learn about wine making and get involved with activities such as a grape stomp, pruning, and wine-maker dinners.

Four years ago, Richard Hughes and Karen Peirola moved out of Seattle hoping for a change of lifestyle. "We've really found it and have come to love Mount Vernon, but had no idea what we wanted to do on 10 acres of land," Hughes says. In his search to find a venture that would be worth their time and energy, he eventually connected with Gary Moulton through WSU's extension office and was convinced that a winery could work. So far, they have planted 1,000 vines of five different varieties and plan that their winery—Little Mountain Vineyard—will produce estate wines only. "It is our goal to really showcase Western Washington's grapes and ultimately make a premiere wine," Hughes says.

SOME HELP FROM THE COMMUNITY

Along with Gary Moulton, Debra Lancaster organizes outreach programs for the wine industry community through the WSU Learning Center in Mount Vernon. Lancaster says, "I'm helping Gary fulfill his mission, which is to help the farmers—and in this case the wine grape growers and the winemakers in the valley—to do the best job that they can: To really understand how what they are doing really impacts their fruit and then the end product, which is the wine."

The center's first viticulture workshop on winter practices this January drew a surprising number of people. "I was absolutely amazed that over 70 people (attended), most of them from Skagit County (with some people from Island and Snohomish County) ... because it just shows how many people are growing grapes around here," Lancaster says. The workshop series for this year continues with a focus on spring and summer practices on April 18, and concludes with a winter practices workshop on Sept. 15. Moulton and Lancaster are also excited about a sensory analysis workshop on May 1 and 2 which will be taught by Dr. Ann Noble, who travels the country to give workshops about her Wine Aroma Wheel. Information for all workshops is available on the Learning Center Web site: learningcenters.wsu.edu/skagit/wine.html, or by calling 360-416-7605.

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bill and there are many elderly patients on fixed incomes that all too often can't afford to pay the balance due.


"Most of the elderly patients come here after they call their doctor and find they can't get in or their doctor suggested they come to urgent care," says Weltz, pointing out this essentially makes urgent care clinics a safety net for other physician clinics throughout the valley.

Putney says by far the largest users of her clinic, both on a walk-in and regular office visit basis, are elderly patients covered by Medicare. Through the next five years Putney said she's been

told the federal government will be paying less for reimbursement for these patients, which puts the North Cascade Family Physicians clinic and others in a quandary.

For now, Putney says her clinic will continue taking Medicare patients and hope something changes at the federal level so they don't have to make difficult and probably heart-wrenching decisions down the road in regard to who they continue to see and who they have to cut loose.

"Our physicians are put in a position to do their best to work within a broken system," she adds. ■



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BUSINESS Briefs

Debbie Brooks, human resources and accounting manager, Skagit Valley Herald.

Steve Hopley last month was re-elected president of the Port of Anacortes Board of Commissioners for 2007. Bill Short was elected to serve as vice president, and Ray Niver secretary.

Four small leaks in seven months at the **Shell Puget Sound Refinery** on March Point in Anacortes last month prompted the Department of Ecology to require the company to inspect its transfer lines and address any problems it finds. Gasoline leaks from a 14-inch line occurred July 21 and Sept. 6, says **Shannon Sullivan**, Ecology public information officer. The three-mile pipe runs from the tank farm to the dock where oil and fuel is transferred to and from oil tankers and fuel barges. Ecology issued a notice of violation after the gasoline leaks because of what it called

the substantial risk for more fuel leaks. The administrative order instructs the company to submit quarterly progress reports through 2009, containing inspection data, evaluations whether pipelines are fit for service, and planned repair or replacement schedules. Shell must also evaluate the causes and response to the Jan. 27 spill, including meeting with agency spill prevention and response personnel and providing a written report to Ecology.

The **Laws/Craig Real Estate Group**

at **Windermere Real Estate/Anacortes Properties** formed a new marketing alliance with **Habitat Construction, Inc.** The Isles, a new 17-home water view community in Anacortes, is the first development project by Habitat Construction, a home construction firm with projects throughout the San Juan Islands and the Northwest. The Isles overlooks the Guemes Channel in the west end of Anacortes. Information: **Meredith Laws** at (360) 770-1997. ■

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Community organizations are already working with the Skagit Valley Wine Association to feature area wines at their events. As part of the Tulip Festival, La Conner hosts the Tulip Frolic on April 14, which will include a wine tent. On July 27, the 18th Annual Golf tournament and Wine Festival, organized by the Economic Development Association of Skagit County (EDASC), will also feature Skagit area wines.

For the last three years, the Skagit County Fair, under the direction of fair manager Audrey Smith, has highlighted a segment of the agricultural community (potatoes, berries, and dairies) and this year—at the suggestion of board member Doug Rowell—the focus will be on wine grape growers and wineries. “We are very excited to display a new and growing industry,” says Don Wick, executive director of EDASC and Skagit County Fairgrounds board member. In addition to educational displays about the whole process of winemaking from grape to bottle and the impact on Skagit County, Smith, Wick, and Boucher are planning other activities related to wine grapes for the opening ceremonies on Aug. 8. “We’re coming up with some really fun ideas to really get the community involved with this,” Smith says. ■

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