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## The Oregonian

### Sweet sip of success

By taking a small but select corner of the wine world, Washington County is becoming a destination for enthusiasts near and far

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Maria Ponzi Fogelstrom was a child in 1970 when her parents bravely started their winery southwest of Beaverton.

The Ponzis were among the first in Washington County to realize pinot noir's potential in the rich soil and cool climate.

"It was considered to be too cold here to grow wine grapes," says Fogelstrom, now president of the Washington County Wineries Association. "At that time, pinot noir was mass produced as a jug wine in California and sold as something like a hearty burgundy."

Three decades later, a couple dozen wineries sprawl across the county, but only three -- Ponzi Vineyards among them -- bottle more than 2,000 cases a year. Compared with California, where mega-wineries such as Mondavi produce thousands of cases annually, Washington County's wine industry is minuscule.

"That smallness, though, may be what establishes the county as a major wine-tasting tourist destination", says Greg Lint, president of Oak Knoll Winery in Hillsboro. "Wine lovers", he says, "like the rustic set-up of county wineries compared with the corporate feel of California tasting rooms. And they like that the person who planted and crushed the grapes often is doing the pouring."

"Napa Valley may boast international recognition", he says, "but Washington County serves down-home attention."

"People have done the Napa Valley and Sonoma wine tastings, and they're bored with it," says Lint, whose stepfather started the Oak Knoll label in 1970. Now the county's largest winery, it produces 30,000 cases annually.



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“What Napa was 30 years ago Washington County is today,” he says. “If you go to a winery here, it’s often in a converted barn, not some high-tech building.

“That’s what people want -- something more intimate and personal.”

Toward that goal, Lint has been working with the Convention & Visitors Bureau of Washington County to draft Tourism 2015, a plan to guide the county’s tourist potential during the next decade.

Wine, along with nature activities and sports, leads the list of county attractions. That’s why Lint likes the idea of a designated driving loop that takes tourists to wineries in the rolling hills of Helvetia, the farm fields of Gaston, the cow-dotted pastures of Scholls.

“Yamhill County gets all of the attention for its wineries,” Lint says. “That’s why we’re pitching Washington County as the gateway to Oregon wine country. We are the closest county to Portland, the easiest place for tourists to visit.”

Lint and Fogelstrom both anticipate more wineries opening in Washington County; Lint says they’re popping up like mushrooms. The lure of the grape entices many, they say, especially high-tech workers with money to invest.

Getting rich, though, is rarely the incentive.

“There isn’t any money in this business, especially for the small producers,” Fogelstrom says. “Just because you’re selling a luxury product doesn’t make the profession a get-rich scheme by any means.”

Perks, she says, are the payoff.

“The way pinot noir is priced, you’re usually traveling to finer restaurants and hotels to sell your product,” Fogelstrom says. “And you’re traveling around the world researching wine.

“The wine allows you to live like a king or a queen -- until you get back home, put your boots back on and tramp through the mud.”

As optimistic as Washington County’s wine industry looks, experts such as Fogelstrom and Lint have concerns. The metro area’s urban growth boundary now protects the fertile soil from suburbia, but they fret that growth pressures may change those rules.

“You can’t grow pinot noir just anywhere,” Fogelstrom says. “This amazing valley that we live in must be protected.”