



AS SEEN IN
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BY BOB WOEHLE
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OAK KNOLL STILL STANDING TALL

More than 35 years ago, a bumper crop of blackberries led to a tasty fruit wine and launched the Vuylsteke family into the Oregon wine business. It was the late 1960s, and Ron and Marjorie Vuylsteke and their six small children were living near Hillsboro. From that successful first gallon of blackberry wine, a hobby was born.

Delicious homemade fruit wines prompted them to take the next step, which was creating a commercial winery in 1970. The first wines included a red, a white and a rose from hybrid labrusca grapes at a former dairy. There were only three or four other wineries in Oregon at the time.

Today, Ron has retired and Marjorie still greets visitors behind the tiny bar at the winery. It's something she says she never tires of doing.

Their family has grown up, and their sons are part of the industry: John does Oak Knoll's marketing and Tom helps around the winery, while Steve and Doug work for other Oregon wineries.

With winemaker Jeff Herinckx and company President Greg Lint, Oak Knoll now makes close to 35,000 cases of Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Riesling, Chardonnay, Niagara and raspberry wine.

Oak Knoll probably will always have a raspberry wine because in 1983 it won Governor's Trophy at the Oregon State Fair with the sweet, tasty wine.

"We tried every kind of wine in the early days," Marjorie said. "We made dandelion, pumpkin (a disaster) carrot (like stale beer), Zinfandel from grapes in The Dalles and Cabernet Sauvignon from grapes near Roseburg."

However, their best two wines have the "Pinot" involved. The 1980 Vintage of Pinot Noir won Best of Show at the Oregon State Fair in 1983. This was no easy feat considering this was when almost all Oregon wineries were capturing rave reviews for Pinot Noir.

Oak Knoll's 1980 Pinot Noir caught the fancy of famous California and Northwest consulting winemaker Andre Tschelistcheff, who is said to have telephoned Ron Vuylsteke and told him, "I have spent the past 50 years searching for the world's greatest Pinot Noirs, and yours is among the greatest I have ever tasted."

Oak Knoll hasn't slacked off since. Its 2000 Pinot Noir was listed as a best buy in Wine Press Northwest's Spring 2004 Edition.

Pretty heady stuff for a folksy Oregon winery.

Today Oak Knoll still gets awards for its Pinot Noirs but even more attention for its Pinot Gris, winning a gold medal at the 2004 West Coast Wine competition. Wines, a top outlet for Oregon and Washington wines, said in its newsletter last April, "Oak Knoll's Pinot Noir is the wine of choice by those who appreciate quality in their glass."

I think you can say that all of Oak Knoll wines are consistently delicious and inexpensive with even its highest-priced Reserve Pinot Noirs selling for less than \$30.

1994 Vintage Reserve Pinot Noir: This is still going strong at 11 years old. Burgundian barnyard aromas are backed by flavors of ripe cherries and blackberries. This still has a lot of life left.

1998 Vintage Reserve Pinot Noir: Still for sale and still a bargain. It's intensely rich with aromas of violets and berries and flavors of light cherries with a hint of strawberries.

2001 Pinot Noir: Very approachable with aromas of French oak and flavors of cherries. A bright wine with softer tannins.

2002 Pinot Noir: This youthful wine is just released and shows a lot of promise. It is loaded with aromas and flavors of cherries and berries and is backed with balanced acidity and tannins.

2001 Vintage Reserve Pinot Noir: Earth and cherry aromas lead to long, deep flavors of blackberries. Bold, long-lasting tannins provide the structure.

2003 Pinot Gris: Aromas of spring blossom come to mind, followed by essences of pears and hazelnuts. Delicate, balanced and made for seafood.

2004 Chardonnay: A charming wine that saw no oak and shows aromas of pineapples and vanilla and flavors of tropical fruit.

2003 Riesling: A classic German-style wine with aromas of petrol and apples. The flavors include apples and crisp citrus. Slightly off-dry.

Raspberry Frambosia: Raspberries seem to lend themselves to making delightful wine, and this is no exception. Deliciously sweet yet not syrupy with wonderful fresh-picked berry aromas. A fine sipper.

BOB WOEHLE IS WINE PRESS NORTHWEST'S TASTING EDITOR. HE HAS BEEN WRITING A COLUMN ON NORTHWEST WINE FOR THE TRI-CITY (WASH.) HERALD SINCE 1978.

