

Wine Notes: Singular vision put vineyard amid housing developments

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"The best way to lose a million dollars," the old saying goes, "is to start up a winery."

That's why the wineries that open with a splash are so often the second acts of the semi-retired and obscenely successful -- the folks who can afford to lose a million before seeing any returns. And that's why boutique winemakers tend to start out on a shoestring, sharing equipment and making wine for two or more labels simultaneously, building bricks-and-mortar facilities only after years of success.

But there's a third, more amorphous business model for winemaking success. A few Oregon families have created companies that integrate winemaking into a larger vision.

Consider the [McMenamins](#) empire, with its resorts, pubs, theaters, winery, breweries, roastery and distillery. Or [Ponzi Vineyards](#), which runs a vineyard estate in Beaverton, a brand-new satellite tasting room in Sherwood, a wine bar and bistro in Dundee and, until 1995, [BridgePort brewery](#) in Portland.

Or, in Dayton, [Durant Vineyards](#), where the 40-year-old grapevines are just part of a larger farm that includes a nursery, an event space and an olive farm and olive-oil press, as well as a wine label.

By diversifying, family companies like these are wisely hedging their bets. A poor weather year or an unanticipated rise in shipping costs can hit small wine producers and growers hard. By integrating dining, hospitality, services and goods -- other than grapes -- into their businesses, savvy family companies thrive even when factors out of their control threaten the bottom line.

In Salem, one of Oregon's most unusual winemaking operations has been quietly percolating over the past three decades. But unlike the family businesses I've outlined above, this wine label grew out of an ahead-of-its-time vision for urban design.

In the 1970s, when John Miller was a student at Stanford's graduate program in architecture, he proposed his own, then unheard-of track: environmental design, a merging of landscape design, architecture and urban planning.

After graduating, Miller founded [Wildwood Urban Design & Development](#) and purchased a 180-acre tract of land southeast of Salem. The property became The Woodscape Community, the state's first green-designed integrated development, with multi-family rentals ([Woodscape Glen](#)) and single-family housing (Woodscape Green) occupying the northwest section of the property, bordered by a school and businesses. The verdant natural setting is outfitted with walking paths, bioswales to capture stormwater

runoff, and a community vegetable garden.

Miller was determined to landscape the Woodscape development with native plants and trees that would blend in with the Willamette Valley surroundings, but he couldn't source the material. So in the early 1980s, he founded **Mahonia Nursery**, a wholesaler of Pacific Northwest native plants that rescues Oregon oaks and madrones from development projects for replanting.

One thing led to another, and by 1985 -- when the Willamette Valley was still home to very few vineyards -- Mahonia Nursery was planting disease-resistant grapevine rootstock, as well as delicate European vinifera (table-wine grapes), on the southernmost parcel of Woodscape, creating an 11.5-acre vineyard.

"I had always felt that the southern portion of the property really made a lot of sense for some sort of agriculture," Miller recalls. "I had seen a lot of work where agriculture had been integrated into urban design, and it just seemed logical."

Where it once neighbored vacant fields and the occasional farmhouse, The Woodscape Community today is surrounded by homes and busy streets. The triangular area -- hemmed in by Kuebler Boulevard, Battle Creek Road Southeast, Landau Street Southeast and Reed Lane Southeast -- creates "an interesting urban-agricultural confluence," as Travis Henry, vice president at Wildwood Urban Design & Development, puts it.

"To farm the vineyard as we do is very expensive -- between \$5,000 and \$6,000 per acre, annually," Henry says. "When you are a small vineyard, you don't get the economies of scale."

And when you are surrounded by homes, you can't act as though you're in the middle of the countryside. The vineyard is eco-certified through LIVE and Salmon-Safe. The vineyard crew can't, for example, fire off propane cannons or shotguns when birds are dive-bombing the ripe fruit at harvest season. "We have to be sensitive to the environment, and we are very conscious of our chemical inputs," Henry says.

Still, despite all the odds against it, this now-urban vineyard is a regular on Portland restaurant wine lists. This may be because Mahonia was among the first to plant the "Dijon clones," or Burgundian cultivars, deemed better for Oregon's cool climate than vines from California. Or it's because, in the early '90s, winemaker Russ Raney discovered Mahonia.

Raney founded **Evesham Wood**, a vineyard and winery approximately 10 miles northwest of Mahonia, in 1986. Local sommeliers and wine merchants quickly took to Raney's earthy, Burgundian-style pinot noirs and crisp, understated whites; consumers loved his reasonable prices. So when Raney began buying Mahonia fruit and, later, bottling vineyard-designate "Mahonia Vineyard" pinot noirs, connoisseurs took notice.

By 2005, Miller saw that his vineyard business wasn't going to break even on grape sales alone. Inspired by Evesham Wood's success with a single-vineyard Mahonia bottling, Miller decided to launch his own label, hiring a succession of vintners, beginning with Raney, to produce the wine. Today, Chris Berg, of the Roots and Klee labels, also makes the **Mahonia Vineyard** wines (Raney's successor at Evesham Wood,

Erin Nuccio, continues to purchase Mahonia fruit for his Evesham Wood and Haden Fig wines, as does Seven of Hearts winery in Carlton).

An environmentalist active in local organizations such as EcoTrust and SOLVE, Miller is also an 8 percent stakeholder in SeQuential Pacific Biodiesel, the alternative energy company with celebrity investors such as musicians Jack Johnson and Willie Nelson.

Needless to say, his development projects are all festooned with solar panels. That includes the 1920s-era Old Pringle Schoolhouse, in the midst of a redesign to house small businesses such as a coffee roaster, restaurant or brewpub; and a 12-acre, energy-efficient incubator for food-processing companies, called East Pringle Innovation Center, which is home to businesses such as Wandering Aengus Ciderworks. A current blueberry-processing facility might, in future years, be converted into an urban winery.

For now, the residents of Woodscape Glen can purchase Mahonia Vineyard wines at the main rental office, at a 10 percent discount. And even if John Miller doesn't reap huge profits from his small vineyard and wine label, he has built a winemaking business out of a lucrative urban eco-community.

Wines from urban vines

What's the terroir of a vineyard surrounded by housing developments? Judge for yourself. Most Mahonia Vineyard wines are available at Whole Foods Markets.

2011 Mahonia Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$20): At 12.5 percent alcohol by volume, this is a summer-friendly red, with notes of strawberries, raspberries, chalky minerality and spice. Chill this one and serve it with light fare. Chris Berg allows the Mahonia Vineyard wines to go through spontaneous fermentation.

2012 Mahonia Vineyard Willamette Valley Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$20): An electric-pink cornucopia fit for a picnic blanket. Peaches and watermelon on the nose; bright, fresh nectarine notes; juicy, with lemon curd on the finish.

2011 Mahonia Vineyard "115" Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$50): A soon-to-be-released, limited-edition curiosity, the first in a series that will bottle the fruit from single clones (cultivars). I find it a bit one-note now, but it would be interesting to taste over time and compare with other single-clone bottlings.

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