

Willamette Valley region wins Wine Star award

[Brooke Jackson-Glidden](#), Statesman Journal 4:18 p.m. PST November 10, 2016



(Photo: Statesman Journal file)

Since its founding more than 50 years ago, Oregon wine country has fought for recognition as an internationally competitive vineyard region. Now, the valley gets to rest among the stars.

Wine Enthusiast magazine named the Willamette Valley its Wine Region of the Year as a part of its prestigious Wine Star Awards, according to a press release. Other nominees include Sonoma, Provence, Champagne and Crete. Both the Rhône Valley in France and Rioja in Spain have won the award in past years.

The Wine Star Awards have recognized international wine growers, producers and regions around the world since 2000. Wine Enthusiast will officially recognize the Willamette Valley at the Wine Star Awards gala in January. The December 2016 issue will feature the award winners, including the Willamette Valley.



(Photo: Victor Panichkul / Statesman Journal)

"We are humbled by this award, especially as we also acknowledge the great regions who were also nominated for Wine Region of the Year," said Sue Horstmann, executive director of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association, in the press release. "This award validates all of the hard work of each and every winemaker in the Willamette Valley over the course of our 50-year history."

Oregon wine is a \$3.35 billion dollar per year wine industry, according to the Willamette Valley Wine Association, and the Willamette Valley hosts more than 700 vineyards alone. The valley harvests grapes from over 17,000 acres of vineyards.



Jim Bernau, founder and president of Willamette Valley Vineyards in Salem. Photographed in 2010 (Photo: DANIELLE PETERSON | Statesman Jo, DANIELLE PETERSON | Statesman Journal file)

"The Willamette Valley, in historical terms, is one of the world's greatest discoveries — one of the most unique cool climate growing regions on the planet," said Jim Bernau, founder of Willamette Valley Vineyards, in a statement. Bernau was also nominated for a Wine Star for the Person of the Year category. "Wine lovers

worldwide are traveling to Oregon to experience our valley first hand and find our winegrowers as welcoming as our valley is beautiful.."

Ellen Brittan, director of wine education at Linfield College, believes Oregon winemakers have affected the Willamette Valley's reputation as an exceptional region.

"Oregon has become much more prominent as one of the leading new world wine regions," Brittan said. "We're seeing more visitors from around the country, even internationally, who are coming to Oregon and are just having an amazing time. They love the wines, they love the region, they love the people in the industry. They find the people friendly, passionate, welcoming — you don't see that as much anymore."

For smaller vineyards, like Pudding River Wine Cellars near Silverton, the attention of national and international magazines helps them continue to produce wine.

"I see the wine tourism, the agritourism, grow more and more every year, and it really sustains our business here," says Sean Driggers, owner and winemaker at Pudding River. "People are coming here from around the country."



Jason Lett, son of David Lett, widely credited as being the first pioneer of pinot noir in the Willamette Valley. (Photo: Statesman Journal file)

David Lett, founder of The Eyrie Vineyards, planted the first pinot noir grapes in the Willamette Valley in 1965. Lett passed away in 2008, but his son, Jason, still runs the vineyard as head winemaker and owner.

"The Willamette Valley is a really special place for wine and we're still an underdog region," Lett said. "Why does the Willamette Valley still get so much attention as a small region? It's years of very careful winemaking, the craftspeople. ... I expect to see more and more mass recognition. But for the people who know and love wine, the Willamette Valley will have a high place in their regard."