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July 16, 2013

Linfield College archivist documents Umpqua Valley's wine history



Photos courtesy of Rachael Woody Linfield College archivist Rachael Woody interviews winemaker Philippe Girardet recently at his winery near Tenmile. Woody is researching the Southern Oregon wine industry and gathering information on Douglas County's role in its development.



Photo courtesy of Rachael Woody Paul Bjelland of Bjelland Vineyards, founder of the Oregon

Winegrowers Association in the Umpqua Valley, pours a glass in this undated file photo.



Photo courtesy of Rachael Woody Abacela Winery's Earl Jones is seen recently at the winery near Winston. Jones was one of several Douglas County winery owners interviewed by Linfield College archivist Rachael Woody.



Photo courtesy of Rachael Woody A worker pours wine into bottles in this undated photo, using an early form of a bottling machine.



Sampling bits of Umpqua Valley wine history like a connoisseur on a barrel tour, Linfield College archivist Rachael Woody stopped at one vineyard after another last month.

From Terry Brandborg and John Bradley — owners of Brandborg Vineyard & Winery and Bradley

Vineyards, respectively — Woody learned about the growing conditions that led to Elkton’s designation as Oregon’s 17th American Viticulture Area.

From Earl Jones of Abacela Winery, Woody collected a trove of historical research on Oregon wineries.

And from the Doerner family of Melrose, Woody learned the history of one of the oldest vineyards in Oregon and visited the historic winery buildings that stand to this day.

“I think that this trip really helped to reinforce the suspicion or inkling that I’ve had up here in the north that it’s not all about the Willamette Valley,” said Woody from her McMinnville office. “There’s such a long history here, and I don’t think anybody has an idea of how long it is.”

The tour allowed Woody to savor rich viticulture history as she interviewed industry leaders and collected photos, diaries, planting notes, wine recipes, advertisements and other materials.

The resources will be archived at Linfield and at the Douglas County Museum, a partner in the project along with Umpqua Community College’s Southern Oregon Wine Institute. Similar work is being done with Southern Oregon University and the Southern Oregon Historical Society in the Rogue Valley.

Woody, who previously worked for the Smithsonian, conducted 10 interviews of wine industry leaders to learn their reasons for entering the field, their perceptions of the local industry’s growth, and how vintners have collaborated with each other and with their Willamette Valley cohorts to further their mutual interests.

Woody said museum Director Gardner Chappell and Southern Oregon Wine Institute Director Chris Lake helped her decide which people to interview and which sites to visit.

“When Rachael called, I got really excited because I thought, ‘Hey, great — this is something Gardner and I have been talking about for a long time,’ ” said Lake, who noted how vital this project will prove in establishing the story of Southern Oregon winemaking. “When you’re going out to market wine, you want to be able to tell people this has been going on for a long time ... some would say the beginnings were the 1960s, and Rachael’s work is showing this goes back much longer (to) the late 1800s.”

Despite this enthusiasm for marketing Southern Oregon as an established player in the wine industry, at least one winemaker relishes the Umpqua Valley’s relative newcomer status relative to areas such as California’s Napa Valley.

“We are very lucky to be a region that is new because you have a chance to create something unique,” said Philippe Girardet. “If you go to Napa Valley and taste all their expensive fancy wine, to me they all taste alike. They copycat each other ... this is blocking creativity.”

Girardet also met with Woody to share the story of his entry into the local wine market in the early 1970s. Girardet was lured here by Richard Sommer, the first Oregon vintner to produce pinot noir.

Documentation of much of this history was provided to Woody by Abacela’s Earl Jones, who gave her research that detailed when wineries were bonded in Oregon after Prohibition ended in late 1933. Jones compiled the records when he and his wife, Hilda Jones, were first breaking into the business.

“When we moved here (in 1992), we moved here for the single purpose of growing tempranillo grapes, so we were curious what the history of growing grapes had been,” Jones said. “I learned what the first wineries were in the state of Oregon after Prohibition, and one of those was here in Douglas County.”

That winery belonged to the Doerner family, and it is listed in post-Prohibition records as the seventh bonded winery in the western district of California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho, though Jones said it seems likely it was actually the seventh winery in Oregon itself.

Historical stories such as this — as related to Woody during her interviews — will be recorded in oral histories called “Pioneer Profiles,” which will be available through Linfield or the museum to researchers, wine tourists and aficionados.

“The wine industry is becoming ever more important across Oregon,” said Chappell, who will add the materials to those he featured in a museum exhibit several years ago on the history of winemaking. “We think it’s critical to document what occurred in this area ... we do that for logging, we do that for the railroad, and we do it for wine.”

Linfield received a \$15,000 grant from the Oregon Wine Board to conduct the study, which it hopes will help Oregon wine industry supporters market Oregon wines at home and abroad.

Considering the importance of the project and Woody’s research background, Jones said he believes it is money well spent.

“I think it’s very important because I really believe that history is prologue, and if you don’t know from whence you come, how will you know what your future will be?” Jones said. “We need to know and understand what came before us in Douglas County pretty definitively.”

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