Klickitat Wine Uncorked

Perfect conditions and marketing support help local industry grow rapidly

By Jeanie Senior

Just one decade ago, a discussion of Klickitat County's wine industry would not have been a lengthy one.

How times have changed.

Today, at least a dozen wineries dot the county, and vineyards stretch from the far west end to the Horse Heaven Hills on the east side.

Numerous tasting rooms, along what has been dubbed the Klickitat Wine Trail, draw a stream of visitors.

Wine has added a substantial boost to the county's agricultural economy, revved up the tourism base and brought new residents. The estimated number of wineries in Klickitat County is 17 and growing rapidly.

"It's getting better all the time, as far as economic impact," says Joel Goodwillie, who with his wife, Kris, owns Wind River Cellars, a winery and vineyard on Spring Creek Road west of Husum. "It's amazing. On a Saturday in the summer we get literally hundreds of people out here in Husum. I would guess for Maryhill Winery, it's in the thousands."

More tourists are showing up by the busload, says Ron Johnson, owner of Marshal's Winery in Dallesport.

Joel and Ron, both involved in wine making for a long time, say the future of the wine industry here could be huge, with local wines winning a steady list of awards.

"Klickitat County is one of the very, very few—possibly only— counties in the Northwest with

Above, *from left, Ron Johnson pours wine for Bill Ward, who works in the tasting room at Marshal's Vineyards in Dallesport. Ron owns the vineyards.* **Opposite page,** *ripe shiraz grapes on The Dalles Mountain.*

three appellations," Joel says.

An appellation also is called an American Viticultural Area (AVA), which designates three unique, federally recognized wine regions: Columbia Gorge, Columbia Valley and Horse Heaven Hills.

About five years ago, Klickitat County Economic Development pointed to vineyards and wine as a huge source of tourism.

"It seems that Klickitat County really realizes wine's potential and is making a commitment to that," says Joel.

Thayne Cockrum, coordinator of the Columbia Gorge Winegrowers Association—whose 60 members include wineries, grape growers and wine-related businesses on both sides of the Columbia Gorge—says Klickitat County has been "very supportive," most recently providing a grant for marketing the product.

"Wine from this region is in-

creasingly well regarded," she says, noting it is receiving media attention.

Wind River Cellars recently played host to a German television crew making a documentary on regional wines.

Kris and Joel had a winery in Southern Oregon before they started Wind River Cellars in 1997.

"We wanted to get back to the industry in Washington," explains Joel, a Seattle native.

Kris is from Wenatchee.

The county even has a hard cider maker, Bad Seed Cider in Bingen, owned by Kelly and Craig Sawyer, who moved to the area from Seattle.

Most Klickitat County wineries are categorized as boutique wineries, with annual production of under 5,000 cases, Thayne says.

Ron—who bottled 4,000 cases last year—ages his wine in oak barrels and uses guinea hens instead of

pesticides to control bugs in his vineyard. He keeps the sulfite level in his wine low.

He named his winery after his son, Marshal. Sweet Ana Marie, a dessert wine, is named after his daughter.

He bought his land on The Dalles Mountain in 1980 and started Marshal's about eight years ago.

A lengthy list of factors makes for good wine from Klickitat County, Ron says: Soil from the Montana floods, 180 days of sunshine, southern exposure and 2 to 2 1/2 hours more sunlight than the rest of the state gets.

"For 40 miles in the gorge, you can grow any wine grown in America," Ron says.

Kris and Joel's property is a steep climb up Spring Creek Road. Their winery and tasting room are in a building that has a European feel.

"That's where the magic happens," Joel says.

Some of the wine grapes on their property were planted in 1982, which he says makes them far from the first cultivated in the county.

Don Mercer planted seven acres of cabernet sauvignon grapes in the Horse Heaven Hills in 1972—a vineyard credited as the start of the current wine boom.

Early settlers grew grapes at least a century earlier. White Salmon's Vine Street is a reminder of that.

Sam Hill, who built what is now Maryhill Museum, planted grapes on his sprawling property in the early 1900s.

The first wine grapes in what would become Washington state were planted by the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver in 1825.

Joel says Klickitat County is considered to be the largest grape-growing county north of California.

Both he and Ron predict more growth to come.

"There is talk of some very large names in the wine industry—names recognized worldwide—doing projects in Klickitat," Joel says. ■

The World of Wine

The Columbia Gorge Winegrowers Association likes to call it "the world of wine in 40 miles."

That refers to the wide variety of wine grapes that can be produced from the White Salmon River east towards Alderdale.

The west end tends to be cooler and wetter, a climate suited for pinot noir, chardonnay and gevurtztraminer, says Joel Goodwillie.

"Go to the east side, and all of a sudden you're in serious country for syrah, cabernet, merlot and other varieties that require more heat," he says. "There are a lot of different microclimates."

The winegrowers association—a nonprofit group formed to educate the public about wine and to promote the region's wine industry—has more than 60 members, including wineries and vineyards.

A map is available at winery tasting rooms, or online at www.columbiagorgewine.com.

Klickitat County's wine industry still is developing. Some winemakers do not yet have tasting rooms because their production is too small. Some tasting rooms are open only from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and then only on weekends.

The list of wineries and tasting rooms continues to change. With Thanksgiving approaching, it is wise to check winery Web sites. Several will release new wines that weekend.

Starting at the west end of the county, here is partial list of local winery tasting rooms, as of October 2006:

• Wind River Cellars, open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; 196 Spring Creek Rd., Husum, (509) 493-2324, www.windrivercellars.com.

• White Salmon Vineyard, wine tasting and vineyard tours by appointment, (509) 493-4640; www.whitesalmonvineyard.com.

• Syncline Wine Cellars, Memorial Day to September, Friday to Sunday, noon to 6 p.m., (509) 493-4705; www.synclinewine.com.

• Bad Seed Cider House, downtown Bingen, open daily, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; (509) 493-3881; www.badseedcider.com.

• Cor Cellars, Memorial Day to Labor Day, Friday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., also Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day weekends; 151 Old Highway 8, Lyle; (509) 364-2744; www.corcellars.com.

• Shady Grove Winery, Friday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; mile marker 82.3, Highway 14; Dallesport; (509) 767-1400.

• Marshal's Winery & Vineyard, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily; 150 Oak Creek Road, Dallesport; (509) 767-4633; www.marshalswinery.com.

• Cascade Cliffs Vineyard & Winery, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily; mile marker 88.6, Highway 14; Wishram; (509) 767-1100; www.cascadecliffs.com.

• Maryhill Winery, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily; 9774 Highway 14, Goldendale; (877) 627-9445; www.maryhillwinery.com.

• Waving Tree Winery, Memorial Day to Labor Day, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; 2 Maryhill Highway, Goldendale; (509) 773-6552; www.wavingtreewinery.com. ■