

LIQUID ASSETS

BY KERRY NEWBERRY

INDIE SPIRIT

Big dreamers and small producers make up the Oregon wine experience



On a cool, early-spring afternoon in the Maresh Red Barn tasting room, charismatic storyteller and renowned grape grower, Jim Maresh, reflects upon the Oregon wine country before there were grapevines. He motions toward Worden Hill Road, one of the first turns off of Hwy. 99 West, which leads to a sprinkling of vineyards and wineries.

“When I first came up here the road ended at my mailbox,” says Maresh. “A dirt road went on from there and nobody else was living up there.” The dirt road now winds into the verdant Dundee Hills, dotted with housing, vineyards and wineries. “In 1969 Dick Erath came up my driveway and said, ‘I’ve been looking all over the west coast for a great vineyard site. This is it.’”

Maresh liked the idea and got on board. Now close to a youthful 80, he smiles and leans forward. “Well, I farm by the seat of my

pants,” and goes on to explain how, in 1970, he pulled up all of his orchards, 160 acres of sweet cherries, prunes, hazelnuts and walnuts, and planted grapes in the middle of the Dundee Hills.

This maverick spirit still infuses the contemporary Oregon wine industry. This storied road now hosts numerous well-known wineries and vineyards, including Cameron Winery, Erath, Lange and Torii Mor. Many urbanites know of the respite found in these winding roads and undulating hillsides. After all, the fertile Willamette Valley, gateway to wine country, is a mere 30 minutes from downtown Portland. Conversations and musings with witty and eloquent winemakers linger, as does the taste of an earthy Pinot Noir.

Still, few are aware of the significance of the wine industry to Oregon's economy. Winemakers and grape growers, however, are

dialled into the industry's boom, its shifting landscape, the rise in wine sales and grape-planted acreage. An annual report from the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service carefully tracks wine grape acreage, yield, production, and price and value by variety. It also measures industry growth, or as negociant Bill Hatcher from A-Z Winery phrased: "It's like the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue," for the industry. Everyone anticipates it.

In winter 2006, in addition to the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service data, another report issued by the Oregon Wine Center noted that Oregon's wine industry poured more than \$1.4 billion into the state economy in 2004, ten times more than previous estimates. This number included direct winery revenues and peripheral elements, ranging from vineyard maintenance to distribution, and tourism and sales from supporting industries.

"It gives a number to the public of what has been a very clear sense for those in the industry. There is significant revenue passing through the economy that was not here 20 years ago," said Doug Tunnell of Brickhouse Wines. It allows the industry to tell others: "We hope you'll listen, because this impacts a lot of people," he added.

This report defines the wine industry's net economic impact. The general public now knows the significance of Oregon wines extends beyond idyllic drives, taste and personality, to creating many forms of revenue. It was a timely study as development continues its sprawl into agricultural zones. Landscape changes loom with the recent Oregon Supreme Court ruling to uphold Measure 37, which could potentially impact the thriving wine industry. Spanning from 1994 to 2004, the study also cites a 60% increase in the number of Oregon wineries with a doubling of grape acreage and winery sales volume.

Pinot Noir reigns as the leading varietal. This delicate grape graced many palates last year, shown by an 80% growth across the nation in Pinot Noir sales. At the downtown Oregon Wines on Broadway, owner Kate Bolling tells customers: "I've got 36 reds and 36 of those are Pinot Noirs, by the taste or by the glass." This elusive grape continues to capture and convert wine drinkers into becoming devout Pinot Noir enthusiasts, and tourism in the Willamette Valley continues to flourish. "I can't believe how many people come to Oregon, not for Mount Hood or Crater Lake, but they come as they would to Burgundy or Bordeaux—they do Napa one year, then they do Oregon. They are serious tasters and they've heard about Oregon's Pinot Noir," said Maresh.

Frontiers by nature breed or attract maverick spirits. As wine becomes more of a homogenous commodity, a vineyard must distinguish itself. If the allure of the Pinot Noir and the romance of vineyard hillsides entice locals and travelers to experience the Willamette Valley, its essence is "idiosyncratic and iconoclastic," said Hatcher. "People look at Oregon as pristine, a place that is beautiful, the last frontier." Hatcher envisions out-of-town travelers visiting a small local vineyard, tasting and enjoying its wine, meeting the winemaker, and having memorable conversations. "Compare that to Napa's buses, touring from large winery to large winery," he said.

Along with its dynamic personalities, the accessibility and knowledge of winemakers and vineyard managers highlight the Oregon experience. Though retired, Maresh visits his tasting room every week, as do other family members. "I've noticed people always want someone present—they want information," he said. "I know a bit about winemaking," he continued, "but 95% of the questions I get relate to how the grapes are grown."

According to the Oregon Wine Board report, local vineyards value long-term sustainability. Fourteen percent of the vineyards claimed to farm organically, 7 percent reported Biodynamic practices, and 34.5 percent were certified sustainable via LIVE (Low-Input Viticulture and Enology) or VINEA. Vineyards enroll in the LIVE program to receive certification for sustainable farming methods which model international standards. It's the first third-party endorsement in the U.S. for sustainable viticulture practices and it experienced significant growth in 2005, as membership grew by 50 percent.

Despite its rapid growth, in Oregon the cultural tapestry of winemaking won't shift to mass production or homogeneity. "It's a different mindset here, it's all family," said Maresh. "Most of the pioneers who started in the late 1960s and 70s are still in business and didn't start wineries to make money, but for the lifestyle. Now, it's the second generation making the wine and tending the vines. Ponzi, Sokol Blosser, Adelsheim, and my kids." The Oregon wine industry remains a family-oriented business. Small farms, hand-crafted wines, and the Willamette Valley are ruled by a finicky grape which won't lend itself to mass production. "That's why we'll always be a boutique type of operation," said Maresh.

Oregon wineries are small by world and even U.S. standards. "That's one of the positive things that sets us apart," said Ted Farthing, executive director of the Oregon Wine Board. "Producers under 1000 cases are important to our overall growth and make up an increasing portion of our industry. They're living proof that Oregon is for dreamers."

After an afternoon spent at the Maresh Red Barn, sipping Jim's storied Pinot Noir, it's clear the dreams the first wine visionaries carried to the Dundee Hills transpired into a great reality. The prevailing indie spirit of the Oregon wine industry in 1970 still thrives today. ❖

Details

INDIE WINE FEST
MAY 6-7, 2006

Sniff, swirl sip and savor wines from Oregon's small producers (<2000

cases) at the Portland Indie Wine Festival, where Sundance meets wine tasting. The two-day festival in downtown Portland's Pearl District is a showcase of Oregon's smallest, independent winemakers. Festival goers will taste the best wines selected by a jury—up to 20 wineries each day—meet the winemakers as they pour their own wines, and sample great food from: Chef Cathy Whims of Nostrana, Chef Dave Machado of Vindalho, and Chef Morgan Brownlow of clarklewis. The festival runs from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 6 and Sunday, May 7.

One-day passes are \$60 (Saturday or Sunday) and a two-day pass is \$100. A ticket includes wines from 20 different wineries, a selection of small plates, a commemorative tasting glass and a printed passport to collect notes and winery information. For more information visit www.indiewinefestival.com.

