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Foundation of Eyrie Vineyards

Speech by David Lett

The history of grapegrowing and winemaking in Oregon, at least until the early 1960's is a bit obscure. I recall reading some documents at the Oregon Historical Society a number of years ago which mentioned that at one time prior to Prohibition there were 5000 acres of grapes in the Willamette Valley. I think that was a misprint--500 would be more in the realm of belief because a serious grape growing and wine industry never really took root, so to speak, until much later. We do know that Ernest Reuter had a winery and vineyard on David Hill outside of Forest Grove in the late 1800's. This land was purchased and a winery founded there by Charles Coury in the early 1970's. It has gone through successive ownerships and is now "Laurel Ridge." There was also old Hugo Newman's "Willamette Valley Winery" outside of Philomath. Hugo had quite a reputation for supplying selected student connoisseurs from OSU during Prohibition. I have some of his old labels at my winery. They include such delicacies as Oregon White Niagara (a native East Coast variety), Oregon Cherry Wine and Oregon "Sub-Standard" Prune Wine (that must have been a real marketing coup!) Actually, most of Oregon's wine production until the 1970's was fruit and berry wine...for a very good reason. The Willamette Valley produces some of the most flavorful fruit in the world which is exactly why I chose this place to grow selected grapes...but more on that later.

The true history of the Oregon vinifera (the European wine grape) industry had its origins in Douglas County in 1962 with the planting of Hillcrest Vineyards near Roseburg. Since that time winegrapes have spread throughout the State with a few more plantings in Southern Oregon, a large planting in Eastern Oregon (which after the winter kill of 1991 is going back to alfalfa, I understand). The focus of Oregon winegrowing, however, has been in the cool Willamette Valley and, in particular, Yamhill and Washington counties. It was in Yamhill County where we planted the first vinifera vineyard in the Willamette Valley in 1966...The Eyrie Vineyards. So the history of Willamette Valley viticulture essentially began at The Eyrie Vineyards.

But a bit of my background. I was born in Chicago in 1939. My mother was one of six daughters. Her father had been born on the shores of the Great Salt Lake in a cabin, the son of some of the first Mormon pioneers to cross the plants to what was to become Utah. Somehow my grandfather managed to bootstrap himself to Rush Medical School in Illinois and became a successful doctor in Chicago where he practiced all of his life. Well in those days "girls couldn't be doctors" so my grandfather kept trying to have a male progeny who could become a doctor and carry on his practice. He had five daughters and then figured he'd better get a little more help from above. So, although the details are scanty on this subject, family legend has it that he took my grandmother to the Hill Cammorah in Upper New York State where Joseph Smith had found the "golden plates" which became the basis of Mormonism. He was convinced that having conjugal relations here would finally produce a son--a doctor! Nine months later Aunt Melle was born. So to 1939. I became the first male progeny of the Russell family. My grandfather was there at my birth and I swear stamped "Doctor" on my forehead as I merged into the world.

My parents moved to a farm south of Salt Lake City just after World War II which my grandfather owned, and I grew up in the land of Zion. (Parenthetically I should add that all six of my grandfathers daughters, raised to be Mormon, became staunch anti-Mormon. My mother was of course one of them). I attended public schools, prepping to go into pre-med. At the University of Utah, I finished pre-med and took one extra year to complete a degree in philosophy... medical schools then were saying they wanted more liberally educated applicants. I applied to 12 of the best med schools in the country and was resoundingly rejected by all 12. So what does one do with a degree in philosophy and pre-med and rejection? The first thought was to go skiing for 4 months which I did. But then I had to get serious. So I took the dental aptitude exam, carved chalk like a pro and applied to 3 dental schools. Then fate, determinism or whatever interceded. I was in San Francisco having an interview at a dental school in January of 1961. Donner Pass was closed because of snow and I couldn't get back to Utah. For some reason I decided to drive up to the Napa Valley.

Now the Napa Valley in 1961 was quite different than today. There were only three wineries which today would be called "super-premium"--Mayacamas, Stoney Hill and the old Souverain run by Lee Stewart (it's now Burgess Cellars). In fact there were only about a dozen wineries producing decent "table wine" in the Valley. In fact there weren't very many wineries there at all, except some long-deserted and semi-derelict structures. Most of these have been resurrected during the past two decades with large infusions of cash.

Actually, the premium wine industry in the US (California included) dates back only 24 years to 1968. It was in that year that for the first time sales of table wine in the US actually exceeded that of dessert wine; namely California Port, Sherry, Angelica and so on. The early 70's showed a slow growth of new premium wineries; this became a frenzy by the late 70's and early 80's. Most of the growth of the premium wine industry in terms of sheer numbers of new plantings and wineries was in California, but almost every state in the union has developed wineries since 1970. (Before 1970 = 153; 1970-75 = 109; 1975-79 = 217; 1980-85 = 505; 1986-91 = 323).

But I digress, the upshot of my visit to Napa in 1961, was that I fell in love with the "romance" of grape growing and the following Fall I shunned dental school and enrolled as a student of viticulture at UCD. Growing up in Utah had not exactly given me the opportunity to appreciate fine wine. [T-Bird, now White Zin...]. At Davis I tasted my first Pinot noir. It was French--it was a revelation. So I began to do research into this variety.

I had, while a viticulture student at Davis, researched the climate of W. Oregon. I had undertaken this research primarily because of my love for the Pinot noir variety, and my great disappointment with all of the many California variations of this variety which I tasted at Davis. A statement made by one of my enology professors, Harold Berg, there confirmed what I had been tasting..."There are few if any climates in California cool enough for the Pinot noir variety to produce its best wines." I took this remark seriously and after graduation in January of 1964 I left for Europe to spend nine months of my own research as to why certain varieties were planted in certain regions... particularly in France where the archetypes of most vinifera wines are grown. Over the many months of vineyard trudging and cellar tastings the question I always asked was "why do you make wine from this variety in this region?" The usual answer was either a Gallic shrug or "c'est la tradition monsieur". Very frustrating...until I stepped back and looked at the varieties and the regions. Pinot noir and Chardonnay were planted in Burgundy where they barely make it to maturity each year---if the vigneron is lucky with the weather. These varieties could have been planted in Bordeaux where in its warmer climate, maturity would be assured each year. The same is true for Bordeaux where Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon blanc and other varieties just barely made it to maturity each year. Why weren't they planted in Provence where maturity would be a certainty? The answer became increasingly apparent--for a vine to yield its best fruit (and consequently the best wines possible) it must mature its fruit in precise harmony with the end of the summer growing season. When this match of ripening time of a particular variety corresponds with the end of the growing season FLAVOR is the result. Early maturing varieties grown in warmer climates tend to have the more subtle flavors literally boiled out of them before they ripen.

Upon my return from Europe, then 25 years old, I packed up this theory about grape variety and adaptation to climate and 3000 vine cuttings and headed north of Oregon. Even though I'd never stepped foot on Oregon soil I had, I believed, "done my homework". (At 25 years of age I knew everything anyway!). The 28 years since have been, shall we say, "education"...but somehow it's worked.

My first job in Oregon (after I discovered the realities of starvation) was bundling blueberry rootings in a Salem nursery for 75 cents/hour. I soon progressed to a job selling college textbooks for the grand sum of \$5,000/year. This supported my theory and my family for the next 8 years.

As our first vintage approached in 1970 I began to seek out lending institutions for money to build and equip a winery. Hell, I couldn't even get a loan from an S & L! I had visions of leaving my precious first crop on the vines for the robins to eat. But fate once again intervened. I managed to rent a 20' x 40' room in an old Swift and Company turkey processing plant in McMinnville--8 miles from our vineyard--for \$25/month. With 30 new French oak barrels and a lot of cobbled together equipment we produced our first 600 gallons of Pinot noir that year. In 1972 we bought the

entire semi-derelict building (dubbed by my wife “Chateau Debris”) and have managed to make it both more attractive and more functional over the years.

Our production has been a miniscule 5,000 - 6,000 cases per year for many years. While this amount wouldn't fill a transfer line at Gallo, we have deliberately limited our production in our vineyards and winery so that we can maintain an absolute control over the quality of our wines. From the humble beginnings of The Eyrie Vineyards there are now over 4,000 acres of grapes in the Willamette Valley and 87 wineries in the state of Oregon.

The future of our industry should be bright because vineyard sites properly located and wineries knowing what they are doing here in Oregon are consistently producing the rivals of costly French Burgundies--at much lower prices. Pinot noir, though, whether from France or Oregon can never be a cheap date. If you want that you need to turn to the highly productive vineyards of Bordeaux or California for Cabernet. But just keep in mind why someone would name a wine BORE-deaux.

And, finally--I can't help but bring this topic up to a distinguished group of doctors. Wine, which is as sold as civilization itself, is under attack. There are cadres of moralists out there today who have managed to convince the Bureaucracy that alcohol in any form is bad and equate it with illegal drugs. There is no denying that alcohol abuse is bad. But there is also substantial evidence that the moderate use of alcohol, especially wine (and recently especially red wine) is good. Responsible, well-documented studies have shown that moderate consumption lowers the risk of heart attack by a magnitude of 25-35%. Moderate drinking significantly raises HDL in the blood thus providing protection against clogging of the coronary arteries. This list of benefits of wine goes on.

The rub is that I am prohibited by the federal government from publishing any positive information on wine and health. The associate director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms recently came out with this curious mandate: “While this regulatory prohibition only applies to untrue or misleading statements, in practice, we hold that all therapeutic claims regardless of their truthfulness, to be inherently misleading and particularly deceptive...” I'm afraid that with all of the semantics and logic in my philosophic training, I'm darned if I can figure out that thinking!

This period of irrationality will pass, but in the meantime, hopefully members of the medical community will take the time to stay informed of the facts about the therapeutic uses of wine and pass those facts on to their patients.