



Old-Vine Gets New Digs

Lonnie Wright and Alan Busacca team up in the Gorge

BY HILARY BERG

In 1982, Lonnie Wright rescued a century-old Zinfandel vineyard near The Dalles in the Mill Creek Valley. When he bought the property, which used to be an old dairy farm, he focused on the six acres of old-vine grapes, diverting his attention away from the other 650 acres that came with the deal.

Twenty-six years and 14 additional acres of wine-producing vines later, Wright—now a wine expert in the Gorge—has given his vast property a second glance, and in turn found a potential grape gold mine.

It all started when Wright met Alan Busacca in 2004.

Busacca, a recently retired professor at Washington State University, had decided to pursue business projects and try his experienced hand at consulting new wine growers. After 25 years of teaching agriculture, geology and soil science to WSU students and 10 years of working with wine-grape growers doing academic research, he was ready for a new challenge. And one of the first was to get Wright on the phone to ask about potential vineyard sites in the Columbia Gorge for an eager client.

Wright agreed to meet with him for

a couple of hours. Busacca was thrilled. When they met, the two hit it off right away. They had a lot to talk about; Wright wanted to know more about Gorge soils and geology, and Busacca wanted to know more about growing grapes.

It was their similar interests that fueled the initial friendship, but it was their drive that forged their partnership. Only a year later, they decided to plant a joint vineyard.

First, they discussed which part of the 650 acres would best suit Zinfandel. They settled on an area of about 185 acres. Busacca spent considerable time evaluating the land, digging soil pits for testing and taking temperatures with sensors stationed all over the site.

This particular parcel has a lot of diversity when it comes to aspect and elevation—800 to about 1,300 feet. Plus, the site has southwest slopes, south slopes, west slopes and northwest slopes. At first, Wright wasn't sure if there was an optimal spot for Zin.

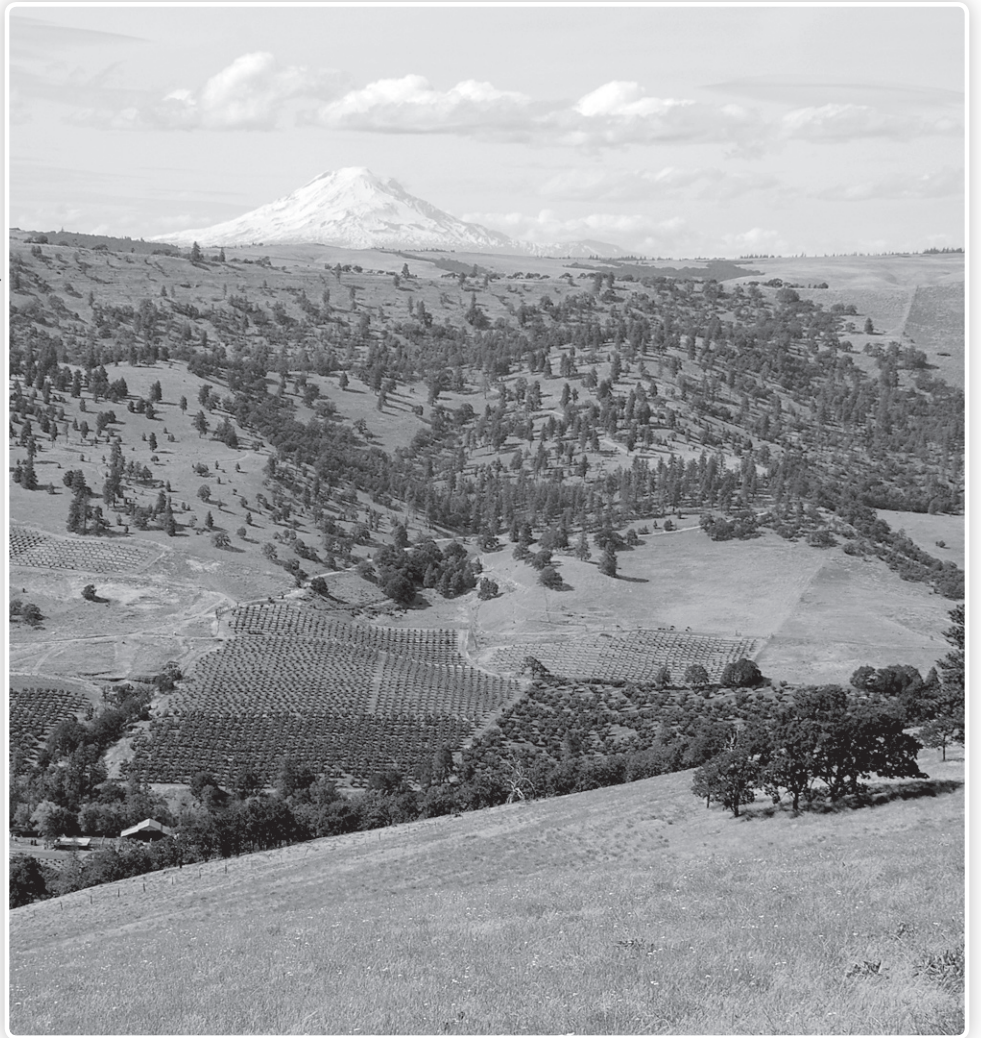
"He thought maybe we would only be able to grow white winegrapes, but we continued to talk about it," said Busacca. "The land is in a really wide part of Mill Creek Valley with really good air drainage. We speculated that maybe it would be warmer than we thought."

After gathering temperature sensor data spanning almost four years at both the new vineyard and the old-vine—which is about 600 feet with a pure south-facing slope—they discovered that throughout the low to mid elevation—800 to 1,000 feet—the growing degree-days were very comparable to Wright's old-vine Zin.

Even though it was higher on the slope, Wright and Busacca estimated that Zinfandel could thrive in this location. And, as a bonus, they gauged less potential for winter freeze damage because of its superior air drainage and its higher proximity to the valley bottom where cold air settles.

After evaluation, they marked 50 to 60 acres suitable for grapes of the 185 tested. And the rest would remain a natural area.

"One of the great things about the site is how beautiful it is," Busacca explained. "It is in the oak pine belt of the Columbia Gorge where you are getting into the drier stuff,



ABOVE: Mt. Adams (pictured) and Mt. Hood both can be viewed from the site, thus the name: Two Volcanoes Vineyard. BELOW: Alan Busacca gathers soil samples for evaluation. Photos provided.

but you are not out to the sagebrush yet. Steep slopes are studded with scrub oak and Ponderosa pine. And from up on the higher parts of the property, you can see Mt. Hood in one direction and Mt. Adams in the other. Visually, it is a very stunning."

Naming it "Two Volcanos Vineyard," for its fantastic views, Wright and Busacca were ready to plant. They were smart in growing their own starts from cuttings taken from the old-vine Zin. In a nursery they created near Wright's home on the property, they had successfully propagated enough plants for 12 acres.

During spring of this year, they planted the Zinfandel at 850 to 900 feet, and the area where the first five acres went in, they were compelled to call "Stonefield." Why? Rocks. Lots of them. Whereas, most of the Gorge has soil that originated from the Missoula Floods at the peak of the Ice Age, this site contains the volcanic dry sediments of The Dalles formation, which is older material than today's Mt. Hood.

"These soils are really quite unique

in Columbia Gorge vineyards," Busacca said. "It took the field workers about three weeks just to clear rocks. Shallow, shallow stony soils, really rugged for a grapevine. But as we all know, you make the vines struggle to get quality. We are very excited to see what the expression of terroir will come of it."

As Wright and Busacca wait to see how the vineyard develops, they are not resting on their laurels. They're busy planning the next 12 acres, not of Zin, but of Pinot Noir.

Usually growers can't achieve high quality Zin and Pinot on the same site, but with the vineyard's difference in elevation, Wright and Busacca believe they can. They will plant the Pinot at 1,200 to almost 1,300 feet of elevation on a section that faces west to northwest. It is much, much cooler with less intense sunshine and a different soil profile—deeper, more loamy soils.

"Lonnie has made his reputation around Zinfandel. But he manages about 15 different vineyards around the Gorge area, and he's been growing Pinot successfully in the Hood River Valley for many, many years," Busacca commented. "We are not planning on going toe-to-toe with an area like Ribbon Ridge right away, but we fully expect that the character of this Pinot Noir will stand out and be an expression of the site. We will certainly be ripening the fruit to a higher brix level, which will make a different style of Pinot than people in the Willamette Valley make."

After planting the Pinot Noir and tending all of the 24 acres into production—about five to six years—Wright and Busacca plan to fill in the rest of the vineyard, five acres at a time, with other varieties like Malbec, Sangiovese, Pinot Gris and Viognier.

But for now, they will concentrate on the variety that Wright has mastered: Zinfandel. It's true the new vines won't have that 100-year character, but with the talent, the heart and the know-how of both men, you know it will be noteworthy. ☺



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