

Idaho adds vineyards, awards to wine legacy

By KEN LEVY
For the Capital Press

"Warm days and cool evenings are conducive to producing a wide range of outstanding wines."

Glenn Coogan, V.P.
Canandaigua Wine Co.

New Idaho vineyards are cropping up from Lewiston to Eagle, even as existing wineries crush their rivals in numerous wine-tasting competitions.

"We've seen a continuing growth in vineyards, and we'll see a continuing growth in wineries," said Bob Corbell, executive director of the Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission. Corbell said sales increases should become more evident in grapes and tourism in the Hagerman Valley and Glens Ferry areas, where new vineyards are expected to bloom in the next year or so.

Other new wineries are in the early permitting and development stages in Kuna, Buhl and Lewiston. Overall, Idaho boasts 16 wineries, "and we think we'll have 18 by the end of the year," Corbell said.

One of those new wineries is expected to open July 1 near Eagle. Owner Mike Kaufmann and his wife Joy transformed about 18 sunny acres northwest of Boise into The Winery at Eagle Knoll.

"We'll be doing our first harvest this year," said Mike Kaufmann. "Next year will be our first really good harvest, and we will be doing our own crush."

The Kaufmanns first planted grapes in May 2000 on 4.5 acres, and completed the 18-acre planting in 2002. All told, they have three acres planted in Syrah and two each of Merlot, Cabernet, Idaho Riesling, Sauvignon blanc, Chardon-

nay, Chenin blanc and San Giovasse.

The winery is also producing Gewürztraminer, a German grape that produces a very popular white wine, according to production manager Keith Green. Eagle Knoll also planted about an acre of Muscat, the only field of its kind in the state. But that crop still needs some work.

"We grew our own vines, but just got wood and not as good a survival as we wanted," Green said. "We'll do more on it this year."

Green and staff are producing some of their own vines in a callusing pit, rather than purchasing freeze-sensitive grafted plants.

"In a callusing pit you root them yourself, and you know your vines will come back from the ground."

In the procedure, dormant vines are bundled tightly and turned upside down in a sunken pit, which is filled with muddy water from which all air is removed. The vines are covered with mud and black plastic, and left for about 4-7 weeks. Calluses will form on the bottom of the vines, from which roots sprout. At that point, the young



Left, Keith Green, production manager at The Winery at Eagle Knoll, works on young Riesling vines.

Below, field manager Adam Laird of The Winery at Eagle Knoll bottles Johannisberg Riesling wine.

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vines are either taken to the nursery or directly to the field.

The soil at Eagle Knoll is very sandy, which is considered ideal for grapes, Green said, "but we're having slower growing than we'd like because the sand doesn't hold a lot of nutrients."

Green adds chicken manure and other nutrients to the sandy soil for early vines. Once they're in full production, "you want that sandy soil to dry them out to bring out the sugar content."

The wine region's growing climate is similar to that of Washington state, where red wines regularly garner national and international recognition. The cool nights and warm days of Idaho wine country's 2,500-foot elevation help optimize acidity levels and add richness to the color of the grapes. Ideally, long summers are followed by long, warm fall seasons, said Greg Koenig of Koenig Distillery & Winery, Caldwell, for optimum harvests.

"A growing season of warm days and cool evenings is conducive to producing a wide range of outstanding wines," said Glenn Coogan,

vice president of northwest operations for Canandaigua Wine Company, the New York parent of Idaho's Ste. Chapelle Winery. "The 2001 vintage was near perfect for us. We had an optimal growing season. We stressed better canopy management and better irrigation regimes to our growers and the pay off was tremendous."

Coogan said conditions were equally optimal in 2002, when Ste. Chapelle harvested 2,100 tons of grapes in 44 days. Idaho's entire 2002 crop is still in barrels and vats, according to Corbell, and results of that harvest won't be known for another year. Overall, about 4,200 tons of grapes were harvested in Idaho in 2002, with about half of that grown for Ste. Chapelle.

But growers are cautious about producing too much of a good thing. Output for grapes such as Riesling can reach 10 tons an acre, but growing seasons are compromised at that high level when it comes to adequate ripening in the region's short growing season.

"With that much, you'll end up processing green fruit," said Green.

"We'll thin ours down to four tons maximum on the Reisling, three tons on the reds. The San Giovasse will be down to 2.5 tons an acre. We'll thin our grapes down to two tons an acre if we have to, to get the quality up."

Perhaps that quality will be a medal winner, too. Ste. Chapelle, Koenig, Sawtooth, Carmella and other Idaho vineyards are winning so many awards "that it would take an hour to list them," Corbell said.

Koenig's wines have won about 20 awards this year alone. Its Cabernet sauvignon won a gold medal and its Pinot noir took the silver at the Northwest Wine Summit in Oregon in May.

"That's a tough competition," Koenig said. "The Cabernet goes up against Washington's finest, which cost 2-3 times as much as ours, and the Oregon Pinot noirs usually dominate the competition."

Koenig and his partner, brother Andy, concentrate on growing Merlot, Semillon and Chardonnay grapes, with a new 1-acre planti-



ng of White Viognier to supplement grapes supplied by neighboring Williamson Vineyards. Koenig grows about four acres of grapes in its own vineyards. Bitner Vineyards grows four acres of Cabernet and Chardonnay for Koenig, while Williamson's grows Syrah and Viognier for the Koenig winery.

Ste. Chapelle, which contracts for its grapes with area growers, including Symms Fruit Ranch, Caldwell, produces Chardonnay, Cabernet sauvignon, Merlot, Johannisberg Riesling, Pinot noir, Gewürztraminer and Syrah. Among its numerous awards over the years, Ste. Chapelle's 2001 Johannisberg Riesling was chosen Pacific Northwest Wine of the Week by Wine-Press Northwest.

"Their Riesling has been rated the best in the Northwest," said Green.