

Wheat ranchers branch out



PHILIPPI CANYON - Unlike vineyards and wineries along busy highways that beckon travelers as they drive by, visitors must go out of their way to find Larry and Laurie Bartlemay's place.

Way out of the way.

Their year-old Wheatridge in the Nook Winery is occupying more of their time as they transition from struggling wheat farmers to grape growers and winemakers.

The Bartlemays have finished bottling their 2004 vintage wines and are completing the 2005 grape harvest on their century-old wheat ranch. It's situated 21 miles west of Arlington in Philippi Canyon, in western Gilliam County.

"We went with 'the nook' because all the historical maps call this the nook," Laurie Bartlemay said, "and since we have the wheat, and we're right on the ridge of the Columbia (River)."

The Bartlemays own about 700 acres of wheat and nearly as much pasture at their remote location, which is tucked in the hills at about 1,000 feet elevation between the John Day River and the Columbia.

"Larry says we have enough acres to keep us busy, but not enough acres to make us any money," Laurie said, explaining their desire to expand their vineyard and winery.

The Bartlemays' vineyard covers just two acres, but they plan to plant another dozen acres. Grapes yield considerably more per acre than wheat. Dryland wheat farmers earn about \$200 per acre, she said, while vineyard owners who sell grapes earn up to \$2,500 per acre.

With wheat selling for \$3 per bushel and diesel costing \$3 per gallon, the Bartlemays decided to diversify. Their transition from wheat growers to grape growers has been a learning experience, however.

"We planted a fruit salad, she said with a laugh, listing on her fingers the five varieties the Bartlemays tried at first: syrah, viognier, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon and gewurztraminer.

"White grapes typically don't do well in this heat," she said, adding that temperatures in the canyon, blasted by hot east winds, can reach 110 degrees in summer. "The syrah and cab sauv do well, and the viognier did well this year. We were pleasantly surprised and pleased."

Bartlemay said the viognier grapes might yield a couple of 12-bottle cases of wine this year.

"They might go pretty fast," she said, explaining that friends and family have been among their best customers. "The market might never see them."

The Bartlemays first planted grapes about five years ago, but suffered some crop failures because of drifting herbicides.

"We were hit hard enough we had to replant two or three times," Laurie Bartlemay said.

Jordan Maley, an Oregon State University Extension agent in Gilliam County, agreed the Bartlemays have overcome some obstacles.

"It is not easy to grow grapes in a county that is primarily raising cereal grains," Maley said. "The challenges include direct and atmospheric drift of herbicides that are safely used to manage weeds in wheat and barley, but are damaging to grape vines.

"Once local cereal growers understood they had a new enterprise in the neighborhood, it helped to alleviate the problem," he added. "It really boils down to being good neighbors."

Don Farrar, the Gilliam County weed supervisor, agreed. He said herbicide from neighboring farmers and from the county's roadside weed-spraying operation harmed the Bartlemays' grapes until the dying grapes became a topic of discussion.

"We were coming within a quarter mile of their vineyard," Farrar said, noting that the county usually sprayed in January when the grapes were dormant.

"The hardest part was them not knowing what we were doing and us not knowing what they were doing," Farrar said. "The easiest way to handle it was to communicate. I'd say we stop about a half a mile from their vineyard now."

After those issues were resolved, the Bartlemays had their first successful harvest in 2003.

"We sold out our 2003 vintages in January, so at that point we decided it was marketable," she said, noting it's a family business. She and Larry share the farming chores. Daughters Jennifer, a senior at Oregon State University, and Caitlin, a senior at Arlington High School, help with marketing, the Web site and other computer-related tasks.

In addition to harvesting and crushing their own grapes, the Bartlemays purchased grapes from two Prosser, Wash., growers and made wine from them as well. The grapes are harvested in the fall, crushed and aged in French and American oak barrels. The wine is bottled the following year, but carries the harvest year on the label.

"We're doing this kind of backwards," she said. "We're letting the winery pay for the vines."

Business is growing slowly. Bartlemay said she and her husband bottled 100 cases of their 2003 vintage and bottled 400 cases of their 2004 vintage this year.

"We're not making any money on it yet because everything we make we're putting right back into it," she said.

Next year, they hope to bottle 800 cases of their 2005 vintage and grow to 2,000 cases for their 2006 crop. They also hope to build a tasting room to add to their winery buildings, which are a converted garage and chicken house.

Maley admires the Bartlemays' efforts.

"Larry and Laurie's enterprise helps to diversify the local agricultural economy, and may possibly inspire other traditional cereal grain producers to try new crops," he said. "It still impresses me how far he and Laurie brought the venture in a fairly short period of time.

"It's yet another example of the American dream being realized. The Bartlemays will succeed because they enjoy what they are doing, and they are willing to work hard to succeed."

Laurie Bartlemay hopes Maley is right about their success.

"We're putting a big effort into this," she said. "We'll see where it takes us."

For more information, visit www.wheatridgeinthenook.com.

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