



Shirley Overman

World Briefs – September 30, 2011

Sep
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2011

From Google comes grapes

Friday, September 30, 2011

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Computer pinpoints prime land

By Neita Cecil

The Dalles Chronicle



WHILE LIVING in Ireland, Scott Elder, above, used Google Earth, shown on his computer, to pinpoint ideal grape-growing areas around The Dalles. He planted his vineyard, The Grande Dalles, in 2005 and recently produced his first wines. Stephanie LaMonica photo

The less ambitious among us use Google Earth to check out our house and other local landmarks.

But Scott Elder used Google Earth to find the ideal piece of ground outside The Dalles to grow the perfect wine grape – all while living 5,000 miles away in Ireland.

The resultant vineyard, The Grande Dalles, sits atop a steep, mostly south-facing hillside along Emerson Loop Road, about six miles east of The Dalles, smack in the middle of dryland wheat country.

As Elder learned through Google Earth and other databases, it has the ideal weather, soil, topography and sun exposure to grow the red wine grapes he prefers.

The vineyard was planted in 2005 and produced its first grapes in 2008. Those grapes, in turn, were made into wines that were finally matured enough to be sold starting last year.

Like a fine wine, it took decades for Elder's off-and-on interest in wine to finally mature into a dream of owning a vineyard. And when it did, in 2003, the Portland-based engineer for Intel was just about to head to Ireland on a two-year assignment to help open an Intel factory there. In fact, he funded his dream through the substantial bonus given to Intel workers who take long overseas assignments.

As he waited for his fiancée, Stephanie LaMonica, to come join him in Ireland, (she had to wait for her cat Georgina to complete a six-month home quarantine first), he finally cracked the wine book she'd bought him a few years earlier.

It focused on the technical side of winemaking and grape growing in France, describing in detail the ideal soil, weather and topography conditions that produce the best grapes.

As winter storms lashed his country home outside Dublin, he began researching the right sunny climate in which to plant his dream.

He knew it had to be in Oregon, because he knew he'd need to keep his day job at Intel. He first set his sights on the Roseburg area, and when the couple came home briefly in December 2004 to get married, their honeymoon consisted of visiting Umpqua Valley properties.

But the ideal piece of land proved elusive, so as 2005 dawned, it was back to the drawing board.

"I started looking back at old notes that I'd done research work on and I thought that The Dalles area would be the place," Elder said.

And that's when Google Earth came in. "A French colleague said Google has this application called Google Earth, with satellite images and you can see whatever you want to see."

He didn't know it at the time, but as he began his research of The Dalles, in spring 2005, Google Earth was in its infancy. "I was using a beta version. I was basically using it before almost anybody in the world was using it."

Elder spent "dozens and dozens and dozens" of hours on Google Earth, virtually scrutinizing thousands of acres of land around The Dalles. He also found soil data from the U.S. Soil Conservation Service. "They have mapped out all the soils in the country, foot by foot. I knew what I wanted from a soil perspective based on that book Stephanie got me."

His property has a well-draining soil called loess.

Elder also got weather data for The Dalles, which showed it was just warm enough to ripen, but not too warm to overripen.

Elder was able to line up his varying layers of data about soil, weather and topography and find ideal properties.

With Google Earth, he virtually strolled through farmland in Wasco County from his home in County Meath, Ireland. He could "stand" on top of a hill and look down, or at the bottom and look up.

"Google Earth let me see everything, from 5,000 miles away," Elder said.



WINE GRAPES are ready for harvest at Scott Elder vineyard. Mark G. Gibson

Contours mattered, LaMonica said, because grapes need "good air drainage," so if the weather gets chilly, "the cold air can drift away

and not get stuck in a valley."

They needed a south-facing slope, to take full advantage of every moment of sunlight, maximizing the growing season. The site couldn't get too cold, which meant it couldn't be too high an elevation, where it would be prone to frost and freezing, she said.

Cool – but not cold – nights are important for the growing season to preserve a grape's acidity, "and they won't

become flabby,” she said.

Having found 30 or 40 properties that ticked every box, Elder plucked the coordinates of each location off of Google Earth and learned their ownership through the Wasco County Courthouse. He hired a Realtor to approach some 20 different landowners, and he found one willing seller: Jack Hay.

When Elder flew home at the end of his two-year stint in Ireland, he was in a car the next day to meet with Hay, whom he'd been e-mailing for some time. That day he made a verbal agreement to buy his ideal future vineyard.

“If we hadn't had Google Earth we would be stuck with the same old, same old of being forced to go with what's listed” for sale, LaMonica said.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. “Everybody was a nay-sayer,” Elder said. First he was told the wheat farmers wouldn't sell. But one did. Then he was told he wouldn't be able to get water rights, but he did, and then a water douser found a water source on his 160 acres.

Then he was told chemical drift from neighboring wheat ranches would be a problem. A meeting or two with neighbors produced a workable compromise.

A few weeks after he found water, he ordered vines. Today, they have 35 acres planted in grapes, of which 15 are producing.

Elder was no stranger to working the land, having grown up on a Kansas farm. But he knew nothing about wine back then. It was only at grad school, at Cornell, that he picked up a Ph.D in chemistry and a strong interest in wine. He specifically picked the location of his two post-doctoral programs — one in France and the other at UC Berkeley —to further that interest.

“Wine is a very unique agricultural product,” Elder said. Most farm products are either sold on to be further refined, or sold fresh.

With wine, “You have the opportunity to turn it into a very high-value refined product yourself,” he said. “So you can take part from the very beginning to the very end – do it all yourself.

“If you use your own grapes and use those grapes only, it has the chance to reflect where it came from,” he said. The French have a word for it: terroir. “If you do it right, the wine can be identifiable to the land and the person it comes from. To me, that's the ultimate goal: that it has that specificity. It comes from that person and that piece of land. Nobody else does it like that. In my opinion, that's the holy grail of wine.”

As it turned out, Elder embarked on his dream during what would become the nightmarish conditions of the 2008 recession. The wine market has shriveled, but he's drawn the eye of Joel Butler, an internationally recognized wine expert. “He's kind of helping us open some doors for distributors because he's very well connected,” Elder said.

Initial batches of wine are a learning process, “because it takes time to figure out how best to make the wine with respect to the vineyard where it's coming from,” Elder said.

And Butler told him, “If you're making wine like this now, the future is very promising.”

Ultimately, Elder would love to live at their hilltop vineyard, since working the land from afar is both wearing and worrying.

He is still a fan of Google Earth and checks it from time to time. In a small irony, the Google Earth images of his property “are old — our vineyard doesn't show up.”

But that's no matter to Elder.

“Everything's in place,” he said. “The vineyard site, I believe, has all the right characteristics to raise not just good grapes, but unique grapes.”

And, as you might expect, Elder and LaMonica did make a toast to Google Earth once they realized it helped pave the way to their dream. But since they were still living on the Emerald Isle at the time, the beverage at

hand wasn't a red wine, but a stout Guinness.

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