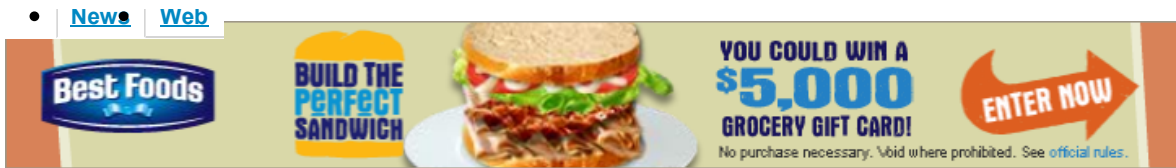


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The banner features the Best Foods logo on the left, a large sandwich in the center, and promotional text on the right. The text reads: "YOU COULD WIN A \$5,000 GROCERY GIFT CARD!" with a large orange arrow pointing right that says "ENTER NOW". Below the main text, it says "No purchase necessary. Void where prohibited. See official rules."

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Diary of a Start-Up Winemaker: Still Fighting Prohibition in 2011

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Vintners Scott and Stephanie of The Grande Dalles share the ups and downs of their winemaking adventures.



Apr 04, 2011 @ 12:09 PM
Posted by [Scott Elder](#) and [Stephanie LaMonica](#)

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With a vineyard planted in the “unproven” wilds of wheat country outside The Dalles, Ore., Scott Elder and Stephanie LaMonica struggle to promote their label, [The Grande Dalles](#), and make a go of selling their wine. From the start, the couple has set out to do things their own way, with the belief that staying out of the crowd is better than being lost in it. These posts share their ups and downs.



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Credit: Stephanie LaMonica

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When we began this dream adventure, this labor of Scott’s love, we were under the spell of one of America’s most enduring myths: It is the land of opportunity. Put in the work, reap the rewards. We knew planting a vineyard and making wine from its grapes would be no

cakewalk, but we did not count on the remnants of Prohibition, a 20th century relic, to stand squarely in our 21st century path.

Right now we find ourselves wanting – needing, really – to sell our wine direct to retail in other states, Washington specifically, so that we can move some wine. Only a stone’s throw across the river from us in Oregon, Washington might as well be worlds away. The reason being the wacky three-tiered system of alcohol distribution in place since the 1930s to control how “alkie-hol” makes its way into your neighborhood store or restaurant.

For us, the ability to sell direct – i.e. not through a distributor, which is

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the premise of the three-tier system – improves our sales margin dramatically. It also lets us promote our wines personally, sharing all that has gone into making them, versus a bottom-line distributor only interested in price. The economic climate adds to this conundrum – most distributors are intent on reducing their portfolios, not adding to them at this time. That and our rather small inaugural year volume make it virtually impossible to even find someone interested in carrying our small, focused product line.

What we can do with our Oregon wine permit is sell wine directly to anyone we want to within the state, as well as any others with direct-to-consumer reciprocation, such as New York. But to sell to retail across state lines, in Washington, and presumably in most other wine-friendly states? The federal reaction is something like this: Mercy me! The *thought* of such a thing! You see, the [TTB](#), the federal governing body of alcohol and tobacco, tells us we must hold a bonded winery in order to sell to retail across state lines. That is to say, we would need to own the winemaking facility where our wine is produced.

We do essentially everything a bonded winery does (and even more these days): we planted, own, and farm a vineyard; we're in charge of all decisions regarding how our wine is made; we do all our own package development, branding, marketing, sales, etc. We just don't own the building where our wine production takes place. You'd think all this would get us more, but in the government's eyes, we're nothing but wholesalers, able to [sell directly to you](#), dear consumer, or to distributors, who just aren't interested, and that's it. Sigh.

So here we are. With all the advancements our country has made since the '30s, all kinds of American dreams achieved, you'd think how we as a nation think about booze would move along, too. But no. And for that, opportunity for our dream falls short. Obviously the three-tier system makes a lot of people money. But we're finding out that same system reduces our competitiveness, all because of an outdated view of what a wine producer is.

What's next? We're doing what we can – working on some events to get more people to taste our wine, enlisting a Masters of Wine who is greatly impressed with our product to help us get some kind of consideration out in the wild wine world – which in itself is another story. Fingers crossed. And if that doesn't work, there's always bootlegging. Yee ha! Stay tuned.

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