



THE
Grande Dalles
INDIVIDUAL BY NATURE

THE GRANDE DALLES: WHY WE MAKE WINE

BY SCOTT ELDER

IN FRANCE, SCOTT LEARNS WHAT MAKES GREAT WINES: TRANSPARENCY

I grew up on a farm in Kansas. Because my mom and dad did not encourage me to be a farmer, I thought being a world-renowned scientist sounded exciting. So off I went, a Kansas farm kid, to get a PhD in chemistry at Cornell University. It was there in graduate school that I started to get interested in wine, Finger Lakes wine. But it wasn't until I went to France in the early '90s for a postdoctoral position that that interest in wine became a love for wine. In Nantes, France, at the mouth of the Loire River, I was taken under the wing of a noted wine merchant who taught me all about French wine. Every weekend, we tasted wines from all over France, and the most important thing he taught me was that wine could have *transparency*—a potential to show us something about the land, the year, and the person it came from. The other thing that interested me from a farming perspective is how one person could farm (a vineyard), harvest a commodity (grapes), and make a refined product (wine) that could appeal to the senses, and the intellect. This was a different farming world compared to the corn and soybeans I knew from Kansas. Even during that time, nearly 20 years ago now, I wondered, "How and what kind of wine business can I get myself into?"

STRUCK BY GROWING LACK OF WINE TRANSPARENCY IN THE NORTHWEST, SCOTT VOWS TO DO IT RIGHT

I moved to the Bay Area for a second postdoctoral position and started to learn about Napa and Sonoma wines at the tasting rooms. In those days you could still buy (and I did!), quite good 1988, '89, and '90 Bordeaux for \$15-20. I built up a small collection of Bordeaux and CA cabernet and that was my way of getting "closer" to wine. I then got my first real job in eastern Washington and I lived on Red Mountain. This was my introduction to Northwest wines. I became good friends with a winemaker and with him tasted a lot of wines from Washington state and from his California collection. One of the big things that struck me about US wines, and especially WA wines, was that so many of them, even the most expensive and prestigious ones, were made from grapes grown by someone else, often in a distant part of the state. That practice has become even more prevalent in the last decade. To me that just seemed wrong, because I had learned about wine in France where—like in the rest of Europe, too—there is this inseparable

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connection between land, person, and wine. I decided at that point, if I ever got the chance to make wine, the grapes would have to come from the vineyard I farmed, or there was no point in doing it.

A 'HIATUS' SHOWS SCOTT: IT'S NOW OR NEVER!

I moved to Portland, OR and met my wife-to-be, Stephanie. For whatever reason I stopped thinking about wine. Maybe I gave up on the idea that I could ever get closer to wine than simply having a small collection. Somehow, Stephanie still saw that wine dream in me and she gave me viticulture and winemaking books. I didn't read a single one. After Stephanie and I got back together from a "relationship hiatus" I had one of those life-changing epiphanies, I needed to build something to outlast me. If Stephanie and I were going to get back together, then this was it, maybe we would even start a family. We needed our feet on land that we owned and worked, so I decided I had to plant a vineyard, even though I knew next to nothing about vineyard farming or making wine.

ALONE ON THE EMERALD ISLE, SCOTT'S THOUGHTS TURN TO SUNSHINE, GRAPES AND WINE

A couple weeks after that epiphany, I moved to Ireland for a two-year work assignment. Stephanie couldn't join me for six months, the time required in order to transport a pet to rabies-free Ireland. It was in those dark, rainy Irish winter days that I started reading about everything wine. The three most influential books were *Oregon Viticulture* by E. W. Hellman, *Knowing and Making Wine* by E. Peynaud, and especially *Terroir* by J. E. Wilson. My take-home message from *Terroir* was the great vineyards of France are on limestone soils. As a chemist I knew there was nothing magical about limestone itself, but it's the pH buffering capacity of calcium-rich soils that limestone provides as it weathers. Stephanie and I wanted to continue to live in Oregon, but there was very little, if any, land in Oregon with limestone that was suitable for a vineyard. Besides wanting to find land in Oregon with calcium-rich soil, there were many other requirements that had to be met in my search for vineyard ground. It needed to: 1) Be a warm site because I did not want to be in the pinot noir competition, but not too hot either; 2) Have well-drained soil; 3) Be on a SE/W/SW-facing hillside; 4) Have a sufficiently long growing season; 5) Be a reasonable drive from Portland since that is where my paying job was and still is; 6) Be land that we could afford; 7) Be located on a paved road; 8) Require no deforestation in order to plant, and many others.

SEVEN COME ELEVEN!

In Ireland I amassed files of information regarding Oregon geography, geology, soil, topography, climate, vineyard growing histories, land ownership, irrigation water policies, and land prices. Two areas of Oregon showed promise: the environs of Roseburg and The Dalles. As I learned more about soil I realized that Roseburg was not going to work for me, plus the land was too expensive for us, irrigation water was very limited, and it was too far from Portland. So The Dalles it was. I identified roughly 50 properties with 30 owners and asked a local realtor to start knocking on doors for me since I was still 5,000 miles away in Ireland. Out there, just one of the land owners was interested in talking to me, but one was all I needed. I talked with him by phone a couple times, and it seemed something could work. The day after we got off the plane from moving back from Ireland we went out to The Dalles, met the farmer for breakfast at Cousins Restaurant ("Howdy, cousins!"), saw the land, and were on our way to purchasing 160 acres in the middle of wheat country. One small hitch; could we find sufficient irrigation water? The farmer and I thought there should be water down under, but there were no agricultural wells within 10 miles.

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Stephanie and I placed a bet and drilled a hole to see if there was water. If there was, we bought the land, and if there wasn't, we would walk away \$20,000 lighter. There was water, and so we bought the land.

'SCUSE ME WHILE I KISS THE GROUND

Our vineyard is planted on a very steep hillside (30% grade in places!) in a vast and open country. The hills around us remind me of curvaceous bodies in recline. The wind is constant and you can often lean right into it. The soil is loess (pronounced luss)—a wind-blown mix of ground rock and sand that blankets river rock, both of which were deposited over successive Ice Ages in the last million years or more.

The loess is calcareous and deep, perhaps up to 50 feet in places, and it covers over 250 feet of river rock before the basalt bedrock is finally reached. We planted the Brunello clone of sangiovese because we love these wines and I believed our site was well suited to it. We planted tempranillo because the Ribera del Duero climate is very similar to ours. We planted cabernet sauvignon because I love cab and it is a very familiar variety to the public. We planted riesling because Leroy, our vineyard consultant in the first two years, recommended we try it, plus I knew it did well in eastern Washington. We use a simple single wire trellis which lets the vines fully feel the wind, suppressing vigor. The vines struggle on this site because of the wind, the well-drained soils, and our farming methods. You can taste all of this in the wines.

NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

And so the rollercoaster began. This has been the most challenging personal, professional, and intellectual endeavor so far in my life. Stephanie would offer adjectives much more colorful than challenging. I never have questioned the potential of the vineyard site I picked out, but the question was and is, "Can a wine of true transparency and individuality be made, and will others appreciate what we are doing?" And what are we doing? Well, the wines we make are not the usual because the vineyard site and farming methods are different. We pick our grapes at moderate ripeness for acid, tannins and overall structure. Ours are not fruit-forward wines, but lean towards the savory and mineral. We keep the winemaking simple and use only very tight-grained French oak barrels. We want to taste the land and the season, whatever that turns out to be.

We often read that there has never been more good wine to drink from around the world than now. Good wine is common, interesting wine is not. We grow and make our wines to be individual, for the individual.

That's why we make wine.