



Cello Vineyards  
By Peter Marbach  
OPPOSITE: Wineglass  
By Mary Cressler



## Award-Winning GORGE WINES

*For the first-time visitor or the local resident, a drive along I-84 through the Columbia Gorge is a breathtaking experience, rich in both history and geology along with its spectacular views. Recognized by Congress as a National Scenic Area, it is no surprise that the Columbia River Gorge is a place well-known for beauty, outdoor recreation, serenity and escape. Recently, it has also become known as an award-winning wine region. Yes, wine.*

**I**t shouldn't come as a surprise that grapes grow so well in the Columbia Gorge considering that some of the greatest pear, apple, and cherry orchards come from this very region.

Columbia Gorge wines have won numerous regional and national awards over the last few years. This has brought attention to this relatively new and diverse wine region, which encompasses wineries and vineyards on both sides of the Columbia River. Simply put, by the Columbia Gorge Winegrowers Association, it is "A World of Wine in 40 Miles."

Taking the scenic drive along the I-84 corridor, you can't help but witness first-hand what makes this wine region unique. The western side of the region is cooler, wetter and averages 36 inches of rain per year. The eastern side of the region is definitely drier, averaging just 10 inches of rainfall per year. In addition, a variety of soils are present in the Gorge. Some areas have soils heavy with silt and sand deposits from the Missoula floods and other areas have more volcanic soils. Elevation in Gorge vineyards also vary from river level to over 1,500 feet, many of which are found on south facing slopes, ideal for the long summer sun exposure.


### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR GRAPE GROWING?

It means within a 40-mile span you can grow cool climate varieties such as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, and Gewürztraminer on the western side of the valley and warm climate grapes such as Syrah, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Barbera on the eastern part of the valley. There are very few regions in the world with this much diversity within such a short distance for growing wine grapes.


### HISTORY

You need more than just the right climate and good grape growing conditions to make award-winning wine. You need the people with the passion, vision, and talent to take those grapes from vineyard to glass. This is something that Lonnie Wright understood when he discovered the possibilities for vineyard land in the Columbia Gorge in the early 1980s. Though he was not the first to plant vines in the area, he is arguably one of the most influential.

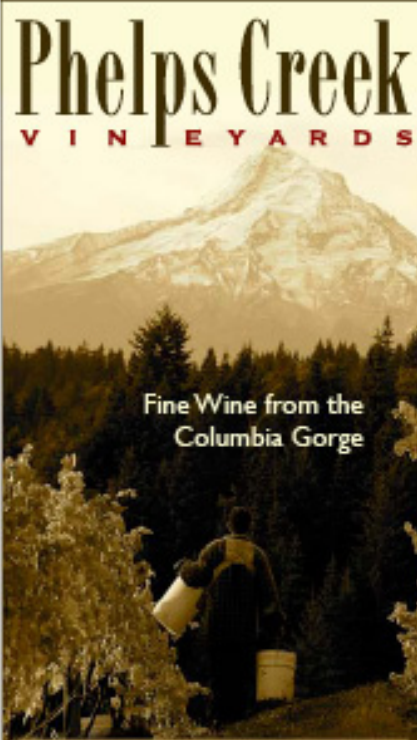
Wright learned the art and science of grape growing in the 1970s while helping to build 2,000 acres of vineyards for Columbia Crest in Paterson, WA. A few years later he heard about



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Phelps Creek Vineyard  
By Brian Robb

an orchardist in The Dalles, OR, needing help renovating a century-old vineyard that had been neglected for over twenty years. Wright stepped in and eventually brought the original eight acres of century old vines back to life. The vineyards would later produce the fruit for the sought after Old Vine Zinfandel produced by both Sineann and The Pines 1852.

Previously, this area had not been considered for serious grape growing, but after discovering it's potential, Wright started a vineyard management company in The Dalles, eventually moving his family onto the original property to manage The Pines Vineyard and continued planting more vineyards.

Wright started by selling his grapes to local wineries including Hood River Vineyards, (then owned by Cliff and Eileen Blanchette), who took their Zinfandel (made with Wright's grapes) to the Oregon State Fair where it received a Bronze medal. Unheard of at the time for the Gorge, people immediately took notice!

Around this same time, Bob Morus was researching places in Oregon to plant a vineyard with the goal of planting Burgundian varietals (Chardonnay and Pinot Noir) and decided on Hood River. In 1989, he purchased the property that is now the Phelps Creek Vineyard and began planting grapes and selling the fruit to well-known Willamette Valley wineries.

Around the turn of the 21st century, both Lonnie Wright and Bob Morus began keeping some of their fruit to themselves and created their own wine labels. Morus started Phelps Creek in 2000 and Wright started The Pines 1852 in 2001.

At about the same time something even bigger was happening in the valley. Craig and Vicki Leuthold built Maryhill Winery in Goldendale, WA, with the goal of creating a destination winery with "high quality wines at affordable prices." Their first vintage was 1999 and they opened their 3,000 square foot tasting room with sweeping views of the Columbia River Gorge in 2001. They began making 4,500 cases per year and as of today, their production is 80,000 cases annually, making them the 10th largest

winery in Washington State and the largest in the Gorge.

Others like 30-year residents of Hood River, Scott and Gail Hagee, saw potential in growing wine grapes too. They began removing acres of pears

and apples on their 40-acre organic farm to replace with grapes to start Pheasant Valley Winery, which has received accolades from *Oregon Wine Press*, *Wine Press Northwest* and many more.

By 2004, as wineries were starting to establish themselves in the region, the federal government recognized the Columbia Gorge with its own American Viticultural Area (AVA). For many wineries, this was the catalyst for the growth that would occur over the next six years. What started out with just a handful of wineries in the 1990s grew to close to fourteen by 2004 and today has close to thirty wineries and counting.

**THE TALENT**

In addition to the talented and focused people managing the vineyards in the area, a growing number of great winemakers are adding to the mix. Some of these winemakers

**“Previously, this area had not been considered for serious grape growing...”**

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have been born and raised in the Gorge and others are multi-generational winemakers traveling from esteemed winemaking regions in France and California.

One such winemaker is Michael Sebastiani who makes monthly trips to the Gorge from Sonoma, CA, to make the award winning wines for Cathedral Ridge Winery. What draws such talent from so far to make wine in the Gorge? Sebastiani believes it is the breadth of offering in addition to the grape growing conditions, "Each great wine region has unique characteristics to offer. For me, the Gorge is dynamic in many ways - its grape growing regions, its agriculture, its foods, its activities, and definitely its weather... this dynamic nature is what opted me to choose to make wine there."

The quality of the wines has been gaining notice among regional publications for the last few years. In 2007, *Wine Press Northwest* recognized Cathedral Ridge Winery as Oregon Winery of the Year. In 2009, Maryhill Winery was honored with the Washington Winery of the Year award by the same publication. Wines produced in the region have won numerous awards in some of the country's largest wine competitions,



including the annual San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

In regards to Phelps Creek wines, *Northwest Palate Magazine* wrote, "Phelps Creek is building a solid reputation as a quality-focused Columbia Gorge AVA winery."

In 2008, Syncline Wine Cellars was among the top 25 wines of the year as picked by *Seattle Times* Wine Adviser Paul Gregutt (who has written about their wines on several occasions). *Seattle Magazine*

Wine Awards selected the Columbia Gorge as Best Emerging Wine Region, Maryhill Winery as Best Destination Winery, and Syncline Wine Cellars for Best Alternative Closure.

2009 brought large-scale attention to the region when *National Geographic Traveler* recognized the region as one of the world's top sustainable destinations. "[The] burgeoning wine industry is bringing a new kind of cultural and environmental awareness to the area that is certainly going to be a boon for tourism and for the area's prospects." It ranked the Columbia River Gorge sixth internationally and second in North America for sustainable destinations in 2009.

This kind of recognition is great for Columbia Gorge wineries as it brings national attention to a growing wine region with great potential. This success, however, would be nothing without the passionate and hard-working people who have worked to get it where it is today.

People with a specific vision and drive to reach their goals. Bob Morus had the vision to make the best Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the Gorge and continues to receive



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praise from top critics for these wines. The Leutholds wanted to create a destination winery and they have certainly achieved that goal.

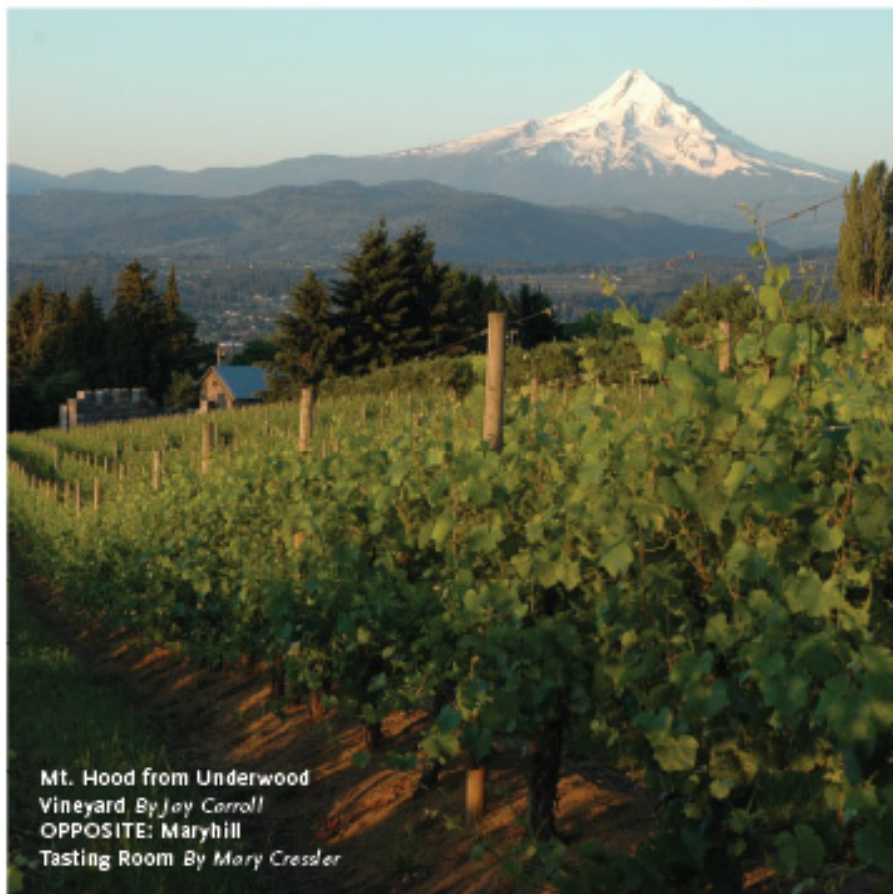
The individual wineries in the Columbia Gorge have a lot to be proud of. What you'll find, however, is a group of people who are proud to be working collaboratively together as a community of grape growers and winemakers. They work together, share resources, tools, and collaborate on events together. Their sense of community does not end with each other, but extends to their customers and neighbors. "If locals don't

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support you, you'll eventually go out of business," Sierra Wright of The Pines 1852 said about the importance of being a part of the local community. You will feel that sense of community if you walk into The Pines tasting room on any weekend and hear local musicians play or walk around their gallery to view local artwork as you sip on a flight of their current releases.

Visit the wineries of the Columbia Gorge and experience the hospitality and this "world of wine in 40 miles" for yourself. The Columbia Gorge Winegrowers Association organizes events throughout the year and you will find many tasting rooms open to the public year-round. Popular times to visit are the weekends of Blossom Weekend, Memorial Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving. Find out more about these and other wine events by visiting the Columbia Gorge Winegrowers Association website at [columbiagorgewine.com](http://columbiagorgewine.com)

Mary Cressler, Certified Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers, is the founder of *Vindulge, Wine Education & Consulting*. She conducts wine classes and events throughout the Northwest and offers consulting for individuals or event planners seeking a dynamic wine education event. She writes about wine, food, and travel on her blog *Vindulge*. For more information visit her website at [www.vindulge.com](http://www.vindulge.com) or blog at [www.vindulge.typepad.com](http://www.vindulge.typepad.com) or email her at [mary@vindulge.com](mailto:mary@vindulge.com).



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