

Oregon vintners release first LIVE-certified wines

By JOHN SCHMITZ
For the Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's wine industry will introduce the country's first vintages made with winegrapes grown in accordance with strict state and international sustainable-agriculture standards.

Certification for sustainably grown wines in Oregon is provided by the state wine industry's Low Input Viticulture and Enology program.

Wineries who subscribe to the program and pass certification are allowed to carry the LIVE logo on their labels.

Al MacDonald, LIVE director, estimates that there are about 2,200 acres of Oregon winegrapes, almost one-quarter of the state's total vineyard acreage, enrolled in the LIVE program. There are 11 LIVE-certified vineyards.

MacDonald said that while LIVE members are hoping their wines will bring a premium in the marketplace, even if they don't they should offer a competitive advantage, especially with conservation-minded consumers.

Oregon's LIVE program received a boost internationally in March when it was officially recognized by the International Organization for Biological Control and Promotion of Integrated Pest Systems.

This should help LIVE wine sales in Europe since the green movement there is generally considered ahead of the one in this country.

MacDonald, who grows winegrapes between Salem and Dayton, said that almost every Oregon winegrape-growing county has at least one LIVE member.

The first Oregon winery to

put a certified LIVE wine on the market is Bethel Heights near Salem. Vineyard manager and co-owner Ted Casteel is credited with starting the program about five years ago.

Oregon's LIVE program is modeled after one in Switzerland.

This year, Bethel Heights is releasing a LIVE-certified 1999 estate grown Pinot noir and a 2000 Pinot blanc. In the future, all of the winery's estate-grown wines will carry the LIVE logo.

There are several steps to becoming LIVE certified. Not only must grapes be grown on sustainably managed, certified ground, the finished wine must pass both chemical and taste tests.

The taste screening panel, which is made up of members of the Oregon wine industry, evaluates for taste flaws or lack of

varietal character, said Pat Dudley, co-owner and marketing director of Bethel Heights.

Independent laboratories check for such things as titratable acidity and the presence of a number of compounds. "There are lots of approved labs," Dudley said. "The one we're using is in California."

Casteel believes that subscribing to the LIVE program can result in long-term cost savings because of less dependence on chemicals and fertilizers and less frequent mowing.

Dudley said that most Oregon wines could pass LIVE certification. "This is not difficult to accomplish. Sustainably grown wine is probably something most people are doing in Oregon. Most well-made wines are going to pass all these tests with no problem at all. It's just a matter of going through the steps."

Dudley said that to achieve LIVE certified status a wine must earn a required number of points given for following certain management options, some viewed as more favorable than others.

For example, one LIVE requirement is that vineyard rows be alternatively mowed so that every other row can go to seed and sustain itself while promoting biodiversity. If a grower decides not to follow the standard, he or she will have to make up the lost points in another area, such as letting more than the required number of vineyard acres go uncultivated to promote biodiversity.

Applying the herbicide Roundup and irrigating are two other practices that will lose points, which must be picked up elsewhere.

Henry Estate Winery in

Umpqua, Ore., has several thousand gallons of estate-grown 2000 Pinot noir, reserve Chardonnay and Gewurztraminer wine from certified grapes still aging. All that owner Scott Henry is waiting for now is new labels.

"Label changes don't happen very fast," Henry said. "People take them for granted, but it's not that easy."

Henry said that he won't be asking a higher price for his LIVE wines at first, "but we're hoping that as it catches on and people realize what we're doing — sort of towards the organic approach to winemaking — that people will be willing to pay more money for them. It certainly costs more money (to grow LIVE grapes)."

Henry Estate has the only LIVE-certified vineyard in the Umpqua appellation.