

# In Oregon's Wine Country, Family Holds Onto Oak Tradition

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by **Devan Schwartz** Northwest News Network Dec. 21, 2013 9:34 a.m.

Sarah and Ben Deumling stand beneath one of the many oak trees on their 1,300 acre property northwest of Salem.

Devan Schwartz, Northwest News Network

The Northwest wine industry has grown tremendously over the last few decades. That's had a big economic impact but has also changed the region's landscape.



In Oregon's Willamette Valley, you don't see a lot of oak trees anymore. Spacious oak savannas have been replaced by farms and vineyards. Economists are predicting a global wine shortage, and that means demand for Northwest grapes will only grow.

## Oaks vs. wine

In the Willamette Valley, over 90 percent of native oak habitat has been leveled. A lot of it has been replaced by long, lucrative rows of grapevines.

But the Deumling family stakes its claim not on wine but on oak trees. The family owns 1,300 acres northwest of Salem. They manufacture wood flooring from sustainably harvested oaks. By thinning the trees, they hope to maintain forest health.

"I feel like I have a responsibility as an Oregonian to be up here and be taking care of this place," says Ben Deumling. He says there's an expanding market for local hardwoods, but oaks grow slowly. They take decades to mature and the oldest trees — legacy oaks — live for hundreds of years.

The fact is: oaks may never provide the same income as wine. But Deumling says it's not about the money.

"I think a lot about legacy," he says. "And I think about the legacy that my dad and my mom have instilled in me, to have an appreciation of this place."

## Continuing a legacy

Ben Deumling's father, Dieter, worked as a forester for German landowners. In 1996, his father died of cancer. Ben's mother, Sarah, had been a stay-at-home mom. But, without hesitation, she asked to be trained in forestry. Like her husband, Sarah learned a technique called "Naturgemaese Waldwirtschaft."

Sarah explains, "Roughly translated as nature-based forestry, which tries to manage a forest as closely as possible as the way nature would."

When the Germans eventually decided to sell their land in Oregon, the Deumling family secured as many acres as they did by promising to maintain the oak habitat.

Sarah says she's glad they did. A timber company bought three other parcels and soon gave the land a permanent makeover.

"The timber company clear-cut all three the next summer," she says. "Every blinking tree, and two of those three parcels are now vineyards."

Sarah Deumling says she feels like she too is continuing her husband's legacy. And even her six-year-old grandson is now showing interest. He recently asked if he was old enough to use a pruning saw.

But the trend lines are clear. Ben Deumling just hopes vineyard expansions don't mean further loss of oak habitat.

"We're down to the point where we have so little of our oak left that we shouldn't be converting more of that last five percent into other uses," he says.

## **Butterfly habitat**

Some of the best grape-growing lands are also home to federally protected species — like butterflies.

Fender's Blue Butterflies are endangered. They are no longer found on the Deumling's property. But they thrive on a nearby wildlife refuge. Sarah envisions butterfly habitat someday stretching from the refuge to their home.

"Long term, it's interesting to think of creating a corridor of patches of oak between here and there," she says. "They need to be reintroduced."

Entomologists say butterflies are a good gauge of an ecosystem's health — like a 21st Century canary in the coal mine.

In eastern Washington's wine-growing regions, native butterflies are already being reintroduced. And some Oregon winemakers are doing the same. Emily Gladhart recently certified her family's winery with the National Butterfly Association.

“Butterflies are beautiful, and many of us have childhood memories of chasing butterflies,” she says.

In fact, a nature trail crosses Gladhart’s vineyard — Winter’s Hill. She says visitors can walk through a legacy of oak trees, grapevines, and butterflies.

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