

Phelps Creek

V I N E Y A R D S

The Story of Phelps Creek Vineyards
by Robert A. Morus--Founder

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area embedded familiarity with Napa, Sonoma and Santa Clara Valleys. My family moved to Danville, California in 1964, just when Robert Mondavi's ambition, and Napa's renaissance garnered lavish media attention. As a kid, I read the *San Francisco Chronicle's* coverage of the nascent wine explosion, noting bottles frequently graced our own and friends' tables. Even Boy Scout trips often passed through the wine country. When canoeing the Russian River, the troop launched next to a vineyard owned by the Italian Swiss Colony winery. All these experiences combined to float a personal appreciation for wine's romance and the beauty of vineyards.

Like my father, I flew in the Air Force and eventually became an airline pilot. A professional pilot's career often enables choosing where you live, even if it means "commuting" to work somewhere else in the world. Wanting to return west, Portland presented a better basing option in comparison to California after joining Delta. Married and originally flying out of Chicago, my wife and I began a process of researching Oregon (1989), envisioning a slow, gradual process to relocate in a perfect place to raise a family, transfer my base of operation and hopefully plant a vineyard.

I drew a radius of 90 miles from PDX airport. Delta recently opened an international base at PDX, and I thought living on and operating a small vineyard, with no more than an hour and 1/2 drive to work once a week, would be ideal; it sounded like a beautiful lifestyle.



A book acquired in Chicago showed two wine districts within that 90 mile circle. The long-lost tome, probably published in the early '80s, actually detailed the presence of vineyards and wineries in the Gorge. I often thought that if a book was written 5 years later, the emerging dominance of the Willamette Valley would have shoved aside any mention of Gorge wineries.

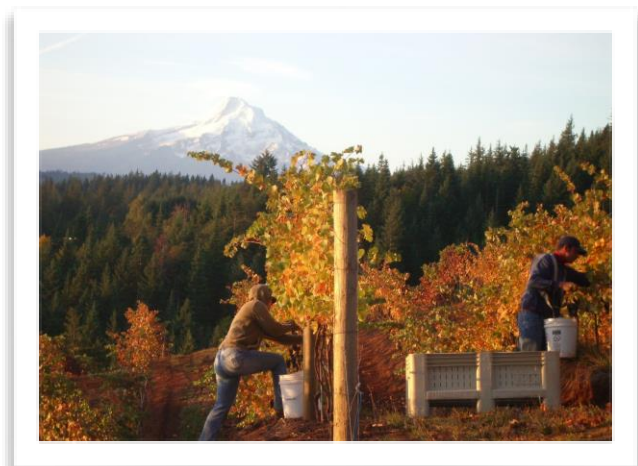
My wife and I arranged our first trip to explore wine districts of Oregon. We knew progressing east, Oregon trended drier. Both of us possessed an unhealthy phobia of Oregon's reputed

dampness, therefore our first excursion journeyed east to the Columbia Gorge. At that time four wineries spread throughout the area (Hood River Vineyards, Three Rivers, Mont Elise and Hooper Family), joined by several more vineyards. On a lark, after being favorably impressed with the town of Hood River, we contacted a realtor who showed us several properties that very afternoon. I still remember agent Suzanne warning the young couple before her, "I have to tell you, we've recently had several homes sell for over \$100,000!" Coming from much pricier Chicagoland, her preparation for sticker shock only urged us forward.

The first property she showed adjoined Hood River Vineyards, but had construction permit issues. We were then shown another site (our present vineyard) and it seemed perfect for vines, with a steep southern slope and holding a magnificent view of the Hood River Valley. However, our research had just begun (this was day one). So next day, we headed to the Willamette Valley. We were impressed with the bucolic valley; my wife found McMinnville charming. As our short visit raced to a close, I called Crew Scheduling and extended my time off, while my wife and baby daughter jumped on a plane back to Chicago.

Remaining in Oregon by myself for a few more days, I heading back to Hood River to do some more research. I stopped by several of the wineries and also talked to county officials about issues associated with properties we had been shown. On my own I found the secluded property with the magnificent view of the Hood River Valley. The second visit brought further revelations. The 60 acre property also held a stunning view of Mt. Hood, obscured by clouds during the original tour. Right then I knew our search was over; this site was too special and deserved further, serious exploration.

Everyone was extremely helpful as I did research on the site. Cliff and Ilene Blanchette, founders of Hood River Vineyards, put me in touch with Lonnie Wright, then a vineyard guru and now the owner of The Pines 1857. I also spent considerable time chatting with Bill Swain, a UC Davis winemaker who at the time owned Three Rivers Winery, and moved to the area holding a passion for the Gorge's wine potential. The bottom-line was they agreed the site looked fantastic for grapes. The big question was what variety to plant? I had my heart set on Pinot Noir based on its exploding Oregon identity, while nearby Hood River Vineyards and Celilo Vineyards enjoyed great success with Chardonnay. Therefore, that's what we planted. It wasn't till much later did I learn that the Hood River Valley enjoyed the same rainfall and heat as Oregon's Dundee Hills--we never incorporated any high priced studies by consultants.



When I say we enjoy the same climate as Dundee, it's important to clarify one distinction. The best vineyard locations for Pinot Noir in the Columbia Gorge, site themselves at higher elevation.

Phelps Creek ranges from 950'-1200'. In the Willamette Valley a site over 600' would be considered high. Whereas, the official weather reporting station in the middle of the Hood River Valley records heat greater than Dundee, typical Gorge sites see reduced heat due to greater elevation and delightfully rapid diurnal cooling. In the Columbia Gorge AVA we also find dramatic variation in rainfall and heat units traveling from West to East. My site averages 36 inches of rain annually--- basically the same as Dundee. Traveling East you typically see a drop of 1" each mile. Therefore sites in The Dalles, growing Zinfandel may only enjoy 10" of rain in season, and are much warmer. The Gorge provides diversity in appropriate grape selection--our choices were a lucky, slightly educated guess at the time.

People often ask about the origins of our name. Phelps Creek is a tributary of the Columbia River. The creek source is a lake between our place and Mt. Defiance, running a path just below our vineyards. Ours is the first private property along its route. Along the way several natural springs feed the flow. The stream terminates as Wah Gwin Gwin Falls, situated on the backside of the historic Columbia Gorge Hotel. Phelps himself was a Cooper, building barrels using a small mill along the lower portion of the creek. The Oregon Geographical Names mentions Phelps' involvement in a tragic rafting accident on the Columbia and the creek is named in his memory.



The soils of our vineyard are described in a 1950's USGS report as "Oak Grove Loam." The profile comprises deep, ancient volcanic soil with no rock found till eighty feet down. I'm fond of saying: "if you find a rock on my place, I paid a truck driver to bring it up." We've twice held the honor of hosting 20-30 geologists as they take a wine tasting break from an annual Portland State University gathering. The group consensus holds that our soil emanated from an old vent of Mt. Defiance lying

only 15 miles West of our place. The soil is not very vigorous, with a generous amount of clay. Classically our wines express a spicy note often described as "pipe tobacco." I've always attributed this character to our soil.

We planted our first vines in 1990. Lonnie Wright acted as consultant, and his crew did layout and planting after I prepped the land. We chose self-rooted Pommard clone Pinot Noir for that initial planting, largely because we were unsure of frost/freeze protection for the site. Presently our 30 acres of vines are split between self-rooted and grafted plants. We have 25 acres of Pinot Noir divided between Pommard, Dijon 777 and Dijon 115. There are another 4.5 acres of Chardonnay, mostly Dijon 75 and 76 with about 200 plants from cuttings of Celilo Vineyard's "Wente" clone. We also have a tiny parcel of Pinot Gris.

The first four or five harvests, starting with 1994 went to King Estate. The late Brad Biehl, then Vineyard Manager for King Estate, deserves great credit for developing recognition for quality fruit in the Gorge through his early interest. Eventually King Estate's vineyards came into strong production and they no longer needed our Chardonnay. I immediately contacted Ponzi and all my chard went into their reserve blend for a number of years. Dick Ponzi, one of the founders of the Oregon wine industry, walking my land and courting our grapes formed an early highlight of my wine career. Starting in 2000, my fruit went to Sineann, where Peter Rosback produced a vineyard designated "Phelps Creek" bottling until 2006, enjoying cult status amongst Pinot Noir aficionados.

Starting with the 2002 vintage, Peter slapped some of his Pinot with a Phelps Creek label--identical juice with two different labels. In that same year, Peter began working with me to radically reduce the yield we hung on the vines. Whereas the economics of selling to King Estate penciled out based on producing 4 tons per acre, Peter eventually whittled us down to 1.5 tons per acre. Peter paid us by the acre rather than ton, and we "dropped" a lot of fruit in search of intensity. The concept was very progressive, and it paved the way towards our consistently excellent reputation.

Rich Cushman joined the team in 2006, when he split our winemaking duties with Peter Rosback.



Beginning in 2007 we built out our own facility in a former packing house owned by Bickford Orchards, and started keeping all our grapes. In the same year, I met the 27 year old Alexandrine Roy. A mutual friend, Alan Busacca, owner of Alma Terra, contacted me saying that three French winemakers would be in Oregon prior to the International Pinot Noir Celebration. Alan asked if he could tour them through my vineyard, as they had never before seen the Gorge.

We accepted the offer to receive the vigneron, provided that we could also host them for lunch. A memorable July afternoon ensued where much wine and even more conversation poured. A few days later at the IPNC, I pitched Alexandrine about joining our team to make wine with us this (2007) vintage. Famously, during Saturday's Salmon BBQ,

Alexandrine accepted my offer by querying in a beautiful French accent, "soo is thees a proposition?" "Why, why yes!" I sputtered and grinned over the prospects.

Alexandrine has been with the Phelps Creek team ever since 2007. Typically she flies out to the winery 3-4 times each year. From 2007 through 2011 her primary task was to make Cuvée Alexandrine, a reserve level Pinot Noir, Fleur de Roy, a Rose of Pinot Noir, and most recently Coeur de Roy, a gorgeous Pinot Noir Blanc. In 2011 we moved our wine production across the valley from Bickford's, to my own estate. Beginning in 2012, Alexandrine assumed duties as

Director of Winemaking when Rich Cushman left to pursue other projects. I currently split my own time in the field and winery with duties as a Captain flying B-777s internationally for Delta. In 2011 my daughter Becky joined the team as Operations Manager, and in 2014 my son Toby joined the team as Hospitality Coordinator.

The experience with Alexandrine rewards us on many levels. More than an employee, she seems part of the family. The relationship, our wines and her story as a fourth generation winemaker, graduating from Beaune's "High School of Wine" and producing acclaimed wines in both her own estate *Domaine Marc Roy* in *Gevrey-Chambertin*, and the *Columbia Gorge* casts nice media attention. Her passion for winemaking matches and pairs with my field employee's devotion to growing the finest *Pinot Noir* in the *Columbia Gorge*. Since 2007 we've enjoyed annual reviews by *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate* with glowing commentary on our trans-oceanic experiment. Our team, now expanded to the second generation, looks forward to a commitment to excellence well into the future.

