



News

Oregon pioneer wine-maker may repeat himself here

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By Kelly Mahoney/Wick Communications

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Arizona has its own wine country but the state's reputation is not one that grabs much attention from oenophiles.

Dick Erath, founder of Oregon's Erath Vineyards, may be destined to change the state's standing in the wine world.

In 1967, Erath was among the vanguard of Oregon's now respected wine-makers when he moved from California to Dundee Hills, about 28 miles southwest of Portland. Erath Vineyards now produces about 53,000 cases annually of Pinot Noir. The winery produces another 12,000 cases from Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc and small amounts of Dry Riesling, Dry Gewürztraminer and Dolcetto.

Although Erath is still involved with his Oregon winery, he has sold it. As a retirement hobby, he has acquired land near Willcox.

"I started there by acquiring property in '04 and '05 and with the view towards planning a vineyard there and a lot of the first plantings we did in '06," Erath said. "Basically it's a large experiment at this point. This year in '07 I planted another eight acres with more of an inkling that I know where I think the varieties will go."

Erath, whose wine-making dates back to 1963, wanted to get away from Oregon's winter cold and in 1995 started coming to the Tucson area each year.

"I got interested in the fledgling Arizona wine industry - it kind of reminded me of Oregon 30 years ago," Erath said. "I thought that would be a nice retirement project."

His first vintage in Oregon yielded 216 cases.

After he sold the vineyard, Erath said he was looking for something else to fill the time.

"You can only play so much golf," Erath said. "After all these years, I've accumulated all this experience. I enjoy it."

While Erath said his Oregon vineyard was initially trial and error, Willcox will be different.

"Now I'm in a position that I can spend and do it first cabin," he said.

He said he chose Willcox after careful consideration and soil testing.

"I was looking at that area plus the Sonoita area and when I looked at the climate and the soil, I thought it had a slight advantage over Sonoita," Erath said. "Chemically the balance is very nice."

He is an electrical engineer. And, as one might expect from an engineer, Erath has done a great deal of experimenting with the land, planting 22 varieties of grapes the first season. He has narrowed that down to four varieties this season. Next season, he hopes to start producing wine.

"Then I'm just going to sit back and see what happens," Erath said.

In Arizona, Erath is growing Tempenioto, Grenache, Primitivo and Mouvedre grapes using plant materials from California.

"I think they match the climate the best as we can tell so far. No places are identical, but there are comparable growing environment from where they come," Erath said. "These varieties do a good job."

Depending on the yield, he said his first year could yield as much as 650 cases from his 200 acres of land.

"It will increase from there," Erath said.

His plan is to produce red table wines.

"I want to see what the vintage that comes in '08 looks like," Erath said. "I think the best wines are going to be blends of several different varieties."

He spends most of his time in Oregon but admits that will begin to change and spend more time in Arizona as his project progresses.

"We have a local crew to do the various tasks there that we need to get done," Erath said. "I think we'll spend more time because it's going to require a little more oversight."

Erath has set aside space on his land for a facility to produce the wine, but he said he doesn't know when he'll develop it or if Willcox will become a wine tourist destination like Oregon's Willamette Valley.

"I think the tourism will evolve as the wines evolve," Erath said. "You have to demonstrate to the people out there that you're for real and not just a hobby industry. It will probably be beyond my life time."

But he is optimistic about the future of Southern Arizona wines.

"I've seen it happen in Oregon and I don't know why it can't happen here in Arizona," Erath said. "I think the future's very bright that we're going to be able to do what we want to do."

For others interested in the industry, Erath said now is the time to get involved.

"There's other land in the area," Erath said. "It's a very exciting time down there."

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