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Business Spotlight: Kitsap Wine Industry Gets Boost from Grow-Local Movement

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For the Kitsap Sun
Sunday, June 8, 2008

Photo Gallery

WINE BUSINESS BOOMING

The growing community of "locavores" who want to eat products grown close to home are becoming more able to quench their thirst, thanks to a small boom in wineries on the Kitsap Peninsula.



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What's this?

The growing community of "locavores" who want to eat products grown close to home are becoming more able to quench their thirst, thanks to a small boom in wineries on the Kitsap Peninsula.

Most of these wineries are "mom and pop operations" — often just "pop" — with vintners who began making wine as a hobby and expanded with the help of friends and other wine enthusiasts.

Bainbridge Island is at the center of the movement, home to at least a half-dozen commercially bonded wineries that are producing their own vintages, either from grapes grown locally or imported from Eastern Washington. There are also wineries in Poulsbo, Shelton, Hoodspport and on the Olympic Peninsula.

Purists insist that the title "local" should be applied only to wineries that grow their own grapes — like Bainbridge Island Winery, which planted its first vineyard in 1977, and Perennial Vineyards on Bainbridge Island, which planted its first crop in 2004 and is working in cooperation with Bainbridge Island Winery. Hoodspport Winery, which has been making wine since 1980, buy its grapes from farmers on Stretch Island near Grapeview and uses Western Washington-grown fruits.

Because of the peculiar characteristics of the region's microclimate, only certain wines — primarily whites — grow well on this side of the Cascades. The most commonly planted grapes here, according to "Growing Wine Grapes in the Puget Sound" by vintner Steve Snyder of Woodinville, are Madeleine Angevine, Siegerrebe, Müller-Thurgau, Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris. All except Pinot Noir are white.

Snyder says it is a misconception that Puget Sound is too rainy and gray throughout the year to grow grapes. The area receives less rain annually than many other well known grape growing regions, and less than most during the most important growing time of the year from April to October.

Furthermore, local winemakers point out, once the grapes are processed and stored, the mild year-round conditions are ideal, requiring little refrigeration.

Bentryn says the climate in this area compares most favorably with that of the Loire Valley in France. One of the main varieties grown here, Müller-Thurgau, is a dry white wine developed in Germany.

"The wines that grow here are lower alcohol and they go with the foods here," he said, especially

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seafood and lamb. "We get wine that has a depth of fragrances you just can't get in a hot climate."

Bainbridge Island Winery is known also for its fruit wines, especially strawberry and raspberries, all grown on the island. They have not made strawberry wine for the last two years because of a root rot problem affecting the local crop; they rejected the option of using an insecticide.

Hoodsport Winery, the other local winery to use locally grown grapes, also is known for fruit wines, made from Western Washington-grown blackberries, raspberries, apple, pear and rhubarb.

Perennial Vintners is a small winery also dedicated to growing its own grapes. Working closely with Bainbridge Island Winery, they produced a 2005 vintage of Müller-Thurgau, which has sold out, and they are currently selling their 2006 vintage. A Madeline Angevine white wine will be released soon.

"My wife and I have been visiting wineries since the mid 80s and we love the people we met and we wanted to try it ourselves," said Mike Lempriere. Their target audience is the so-called "locavores," a term made popular by Michael Pollan in his recent book, "Omnivore's Dilemma." Pollan urged people to consume locally grown foods to avoid the carbon emissions required to transport food long distances.

Because the varieties that can be grown in Western Washington are limited by climate conditions, smaller wineries have opted to import their grapes and process them here. However some, like Hoodsport, have a hand in crop production on the other side of the mountains before grapes are transported for processing.

Eleven Winery, founded by former professional bicycle racer Matt Albee, was the second of Bainbridge Island's six winemakers to go into production, releasing its first white wines in 2004 and reds in 2005. Its wines, along with those of Eagle Harbor Wine Co., are featured at a tasting room at 278 Winslow Way.

Eagle Harbor, like many of the others, is pretty much a one-man operation. Hugh Remash had worked previously as a wholesale wine importing rep and formerly owned the Winslow Wine Shop. "What we hope to do," he says, "is make this a destination place for people who want to visit wineries."

"To me making wine is like cooking," Remash says. "It's like making a stew over two or three years. You have to get all the ingredients together and you have to treat the ingredients carefully."

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