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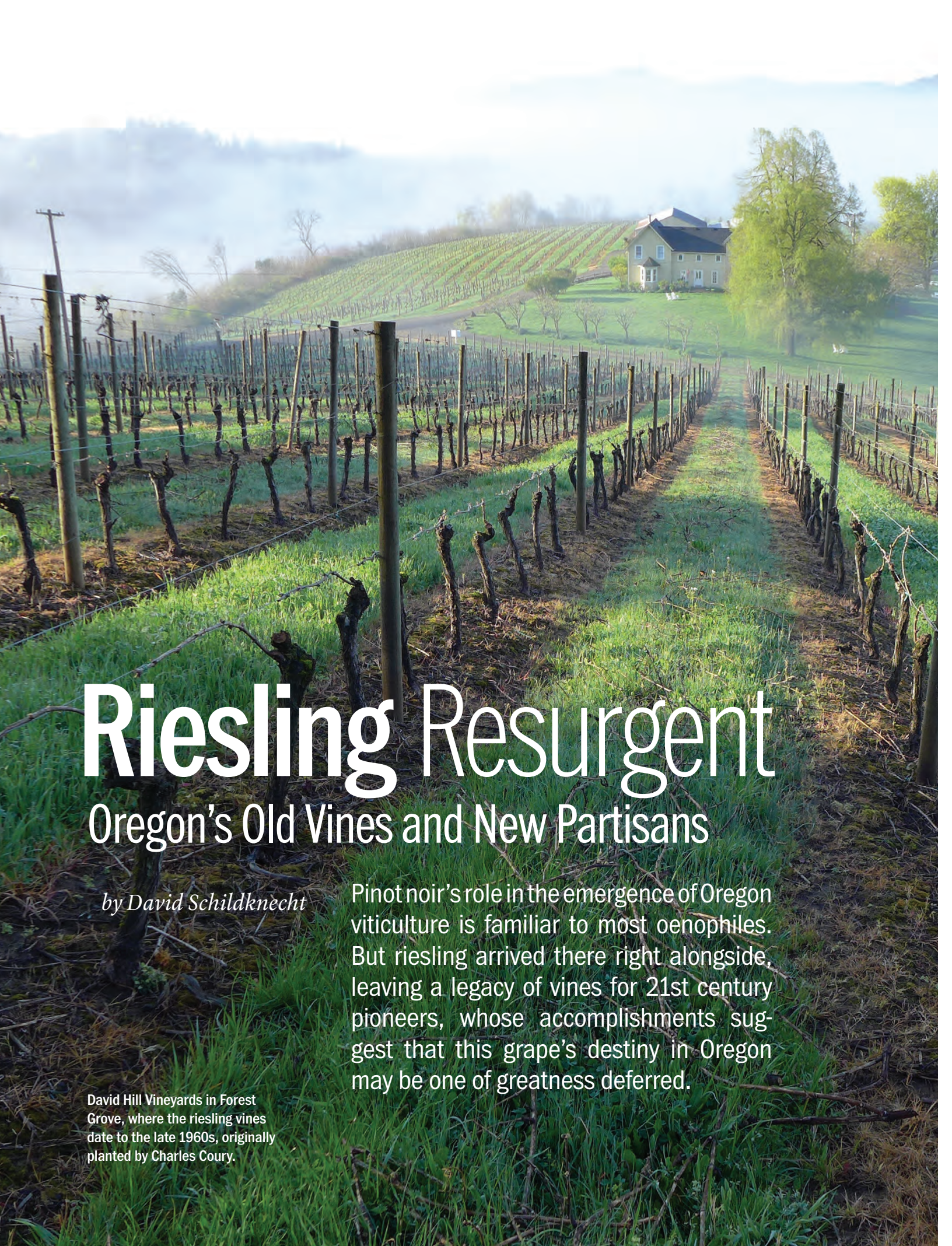


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# Riesling Resurgent

## Oregon's Old Vines and New Partisans

*by David Schildknecht*

Pinot noir's role in the emergence of Oregon viticulture is familiar to most oenophiles. But riesling arrived there right alongside, leaving a legacy of vines for 21st century pioneers, whose accomplishments suggest that this grape's destiny in Oregon may be one of greatness deferred.

David Hill Vineyards in Forest Grove, where the riesling vines date to the late 1960s, originally planted by Charles Coury.



When Richard Sommer established Hillcrest Vineyard in the Umpqua Valley in 1961, what little viticulture preceded him in Oregon had been wiped out by Prohibition. Sommer had trained at UC Davis, where his conviction that Oregon harbored vinifera potential encountered the same skepticism soon met by Willamette Valley pioneers Charles Coury and David Lett. They came through Davis as well and, in 1966, planted their first home vineyards, Coury in Forest Grove west of Portland and Lett in the Dundee Hills. All shared an intuition that superior wine grapes could be grown at the cool-climate margins of their ability to ripen (a notion long prevalent among German riesling growers). The three also shared a devotion to pinot noir. But it was riesling that Sommer chose to accompany his first pinot plantings; Coury, who had spent the previous year on a research grant in Alsace, started in 1966 with gewurztraminer and pinot; by 1972, he was bottling riesling as well.

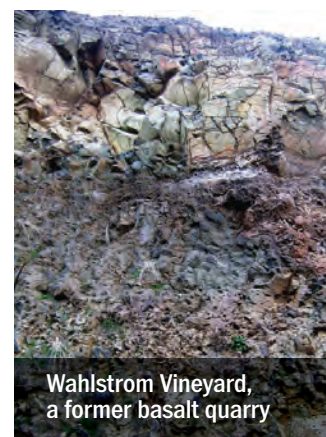
Engineer Dick Erath came north in 1968 determined to get in on the ground floor of Oregon's fledgling wine industry and sought assistance from Coury, with whom he would soon collaborate on a vine nursery. When Erath persuaded prune farmer Jim Maresh, his soon-to-be-neighbor on Worden Hill Road, to "try something new" it was not just pinot noir but riesling vines from California that he was peddling. ("Dick didn't realize that mine was an act of desperation," joked Maresh, 45 years later. "I was sitting on three hundred tons of unsold, unsellable prunes.") Erath's early ambassadorship for riesling was far-reaching. Early plantings utilizing his vine material included Sunnyside Vineyard south of Salem (1970), Richard Cuddihy's vineyard west of Yamhill (1971) and Hyland Estate in the Coast Range foothills southwest of McMinnville (1972). In 1974, Don Byard planted Erath riesling on what would become the estate vineyard of Brooks Winery in the Eola Hills, the same year Elk Cove founders Pat and Joe Campbell included riesling in their initial plantings.

In 1971 Ted Gerber, then in his twenties, purchased land 50 miles from the ocean along the valley of the Illinois River (the westernmost tributary

of the Rogue) and, without realizing it, replicated Coury's initial choice of vines. "The first grapes I planted were pinot noir and gewurztraminer," he relates, "because the [Oregon State University] research station at Central Point said those were their two earliest-ripening varieties. Of course," he adds, "I know now that gewurztraminer isn't really 'early' if you really want to get it ripe. But they were only going by Brix." The first riesling—quintessential late-ripening though that grape is—arrived soon thereafter, and, in the late 1970s, Oregon State gifted Gerber with diverse experimental vine material from Alsace in an effort to find out what worked best. "Are we Burgundy or are we Germany?" was kind of the question at that time," he recalls. History might seem to have answered that question decisively, especially for the Willamette Valley. But there is always the next chapter to be written.

Riesling occasionally reminded its callow 1970s Oregon custodians that, by definition, wine growing "on the margins" implied periodic failure. "One year it rained so much," recalls Jim Maresh, "that I told [my wife], Loie, 'I can't sell this stuff. You sell it if you insist.' We labeled it as 'picnic wine' because you don't expect too much at a picnic, and I put up a sign in the barn that said, 'Shoplifters will *not* be prosecuted.'" In the summer of 1975, the local Fred Meyer grocery chain advertised Coury Riesling with the following copy: "Although Oregon wines are new to the industry, don't underestimate the quality of these fine wines grown near Forest Grove." The price of \$2.89 a fifth, though, told a familiar late-20th-century story: Coury's chardonnay commanded a 50-cent premium, anticipating the proliferation of Burgundy's iconic white which, along with pinot noir and pinot gris, David Lett had favored. That trio would eventually dilute riesling to less than three percent of Oregon vine acreage.

But riesling would not go down without a fight. In the mid-'80s, it topped out at nearly one-quarter of production statewide. Meanwhile, a new but no-longer-young contingent of would-be wine-growers was motivated to embark for Oregon.



Wahlstrom Vineyard, a former basalt quarry

“The secret turned out to be: find the coldest and oldest sites you can.”  
—Barnaby Tuttle



Crow Valley Vineyard, west of Eugene, where riesling vines date to the mid-'70s

Alan Mitchell, manager of Crow Valley Vineyard, ten miles west of Eugene, when asked what might have prompted that site's original owners to plant riesling and gewurztraminer in the mid-1970s, suggested it was “the same kind of insanity that makes most people do this: romance, lifestyle.” Evidently planting those particular grapes wasn't considered less romantic or more insane (not yet, at least) than putting in pinot noir. As late as 1987, when Ohioans Julia Staigers and Gerard Koschal moved onto an increasingly pinot-centric Worden Hill Road, they replaced all the non-pinot vines *except* for the riesling, which readily sold to a passing southern Oregon vintner alerted by a “grapes for sale” sign at the head of the driveway.

Although Staigers and Koschal, like many growers, were soon challenged by a weakening market for riesling grapes, the variety continued to elicit serious attention and new plantings from a handful of prominent Willamette Valley wineries. Elk Cove made room for it on two more of their half-dozen vineyards. Chehalem founder Harry Peterson-Nedry's love for riesling led him to plant it in 1990 at his Ribbon Ridge site, as well as his two subsequent locations. And at Brooks Winery, Janie Heuck and Chris Williams render a half-dozen site-specific rieslings over and beyond multiple blends and bottlings from their estate vines. “We keep getting

more and more offers [to buy riesling grapes],” explains Heuck, “because people know that's what we're focused on.”

But, as with most other “New World” rieslings, even the wines from conscientious Oregon growers like these display some dubious traits. A prominent example is fusel or petrol aromas in a young wine, once something of a mystery but now traceable to a compound whose name is abbreviated as TDN and correlates with sun exposure of the fruit clusters. It's clear that some consumers have developed a taste for this, but if a grower wants to eliminate it, shading fruit without trapping humidity and encouraging rot is tricky. Excessive green-apple tartness and citrus-rind bitterness, or just plain lack of juiciness, are other frequent weaknesses. And while sweetness might be deemed desirable for counteracting bitterness and lowering alcohol, New World rieslings nearly always lack their German counterparts' ability to hide residual sugar, even when they retain as high an acidity and as low a pH as any in the Mosel. These are among the challenges for those wishing to take Oregon riesling to the next level.

**T**ad Seestedt founded Ransom Spirits in 1997, but although his company's name points to his serious pursuit of historically authentic spirits,



he has made wine, too, since day one. Seestedt let some of his grape contracts lapse while preoccupied with such projects as replicating an 1865 batch of Irish Whisky and creating vermouths whose taste would explain the once prestigious status of that genre. He subsequently reactivated a relationship he had enjoyed with Tom Owen and Luci Wisniewski, owner-operators of Sunnyside Vineyard since 1980. In 2014, the wine he crafted from those old vines south of Salem evinces only well-integrated hints of petrol and lime peel, and displays a striking alliance of density with alcoholic levity.

That Seestedt's Sunnyside success isn't some winemaking tour de force is demonstrated not only by his familiar claim to have done as little "making" as possible, but also by the equally vibrant and infectiously juicy 2014 Sunnyside Riesling crafted by Seestedt protégé and former restaurant manager Matt Berson under his Love & Squalor label. Berson, who also works adeptly with the fruit of Richard Cuddihy's 1971 planting, ferments and raises multiple tiny lots according to differing protocols, one possible explanation for the satisfying complexity of his results. Another intriguing piece of the Sunnyside puzzle—assuming you're puzzled that riesling this good comes from a place of which few riesling-lovers have heard—is that the vines are trained with so-called *Pendelbogen* arches, a method that promotes sap distribution and efficient picking, as well as depresses must weights, which might nowadays be advantageous.

Portlander Barnaby Tuttle and his New Jersey-born wife and business partner, Olga, are behind one of the most audacious and implausibly successful American wine ventures of recent decades, of which riesling forms a statistically modest but emotionally enormous part thanks to the inspiration of the couple's first visit to the Mosel. To measure the extent of that audacity, consider two vineyards they own: Alsea lies quixotically close to the Pacific (22 miles away) to be growing pinot noir, and more than a dozen crow-flying miles west across Oregon's Coastal Range from the next nearest vineyard. And the Tuttle's home vineyard is literally that: an urban *Gemischter Satz* occupying their entire front and back yards in an impeccably maintained Arts and Crafts-era Portland neighborhood.

Asked whether at the 2008 inception of their Teutonic Wine Company he had any suspicion of how many vineyards with riesling and other broadly speaking "Teutonic" grapes were accessible in Oregon, Barnaby Tuttle replied: "Not at all—not, at, all! When I planted Alsea [with 75 percent

pinot noir] I wasn't even sure I knew how to make white wine. I didn't even think about buying fruit from other people until I went to work at a shared facility." His first contract, with Borgo Pass Vineyard, was for pinot meunier, the minority grape at Alsea a dozen miles west. "Then people started seeing what I was doing and the next vintage somebody says, 'Hey, would you be interested in these grapes?' The secret turned out to be: find the coldest and oldest sites you can." The Tuttle's soon found themselves vinifying a significant share of the fruit from Charles Coury's original plantings (now known as David Hill Vineyards), naturally including the riesling.

By the time he made it to Crow Valley Vineyard, Barnaby Tuttle had turned proactive. "I can't remember how he heard about the place," says vineyard manager Mitchell, "but he was looking for South [Willamette] Valley stuff, for oddball stuff, and especially for riesling. He fell in love with this place, primarily because the vines were so old, and now he takes all of it." Whole-cluster-pressed and spontaneously fermented in old barriques (other sizes of wooden vessels not yet being within the Tuttle's means), their series of Crow Valley rieslings from 2011 through 2014 are all well below 10 percent in alcohol, and none—not even the 2012, harboring 20 grams of residual sugar—tastes overtly sweet. They boast a rare combination of lushness with buoyancy, vibrancy and brightness. The Tuttle's latest project, whose like has never before been seen in Oregon, is a tightly spaced quarter-acre of riesling on the nearly bare-faced basalt rock of Wahlstrom Vineyard, a decommissioned gravel quarry in Wilsonville, barely a dozen miles from downtown Portland. Its first fruits are due later this year.

Unlike the Tuttle's, John House and his wife, Ksenija Kostic, founded Ovum Wines in 2011 expressly to explore the potential of white grapes in Oregon, with the emphasis quickly falling on riesling. Exploring cool-climate options not just in the Willamette Valley but beyond, House relates that "we visited around fifteen growers on the way down south, but no place struck us like Ted Gerber's Foris Vineyards. We'd seen many old vineyards, but they weren't well tended, and we knew that to make wines the way we wanted to make them, with no cosmetics, that wasn't going to work." Even so, House calls his decision to source fruit from this "off-the-grid" location "a real Hail Mary."

"Because I didn't know to do leaf-stripping," explains Gerber of his initial riesling venture,



Matt Berson of Love & Squalor



John House (r.) with owner-vineyard manager Ted Gerber in the Illinois Valley's cobbled Cedar Ranch Vineyard.

“there was always botrytis. I got some great dessert wine, but I didn’t think that would be commercially viable.” By the time he got an opportunity to replant nearby Cedar Ranch Vineyard, whose cobble-littered surface had been a creek bed until local streams were diverted in the 1960s, Gerber thought he’d figured out how to handle riesling, and House’s results prove it. As “Ovum” is intended to suggest, he and Kostic place great significance on slow, largely undisturbed pre-bottling evolution protectively shrouded by lees, usually in old barriques, though they do own one concrete egg. The results gain caressing textural allure without sacrificing refreshment, clarity or mouthwatering salinity. House also taps Lone Star in the Eola-Amity Hills and Meyer Vineyard, on eroded basalt at a high spot in the Dundee Hills. Seductively floral, the Ovum rieslings deftly integrate both residual sugar and the piquancy of peach kernel, nut and citrus rind.

**J**ames Frey received professional recognition for his photojournalism in his teens and seriously branched into painting in his late twenties, but was past thirty before wine even became part of his life, much less the passion that culminated in a search early in the new millennium for potential vineyard property in the Willamette Valley. He and his wife, Andrea, set as a precondition that the site be suitable for both pinot noir and riesling, and after struggling to locate their first coastal foothills vineyard, in 2003 they jumped at the opportunity to purchase another property in Ribbon Ridge—bordering Beaux Frères, Patricia Green and Brick House. They added a small, mature vineyard in the Dundee Hills in 2011, and promptly grafted over its pinot gris to riesling: And then there were three dual-*cépage* Trisaetum Estate properties.

From each of these, Frey vinifies both a dry and an overtly sweet riesling. (He also assembles wine from all three into a later-bottled “Estates Reserve.”) Each bottling typically reflects two passes per vineyard. And each is assembled from myriad batches housed in steel tanks, concrete, or used barriques (ones crafted express-

ly for Jadot, whose new Willamette project is temporarily housed at Trisaetum). The best Trisaetum rieslings practically shimmer in their interaction of fruity, floral, spicy and mineral elements, and a few wines have achieved a harmonious sweetness rarely witnessed outside of Germany. “When the ferment starts,” he explains, “barrels aren’t destined to be dry or off-dry. It’s only as I taste them near the end of the ferment that I decide whether I want to stop one or let it continue. It ultimately comes down to me tasting a lot of active ferments in the months of November and December”—from 2014 there were more than 100—“and making judgment calls as to the balance of the fruit and acid. [It’s] more art than science at that point in the process.” And Frey the artist seems ideally suited to that task. The flexibility afforded by such diverse lots is complemented by an appreciation that, “If you only look at pH and residual sugar, you miss a number of critically important factors that ultimately determine a riesling’s perceived balance [including] the ratio of malic to tartaric acid [or] whether the wine was fermented in stainless steel, oak or concrete, each of which imparts a unique characteristic to the acid-sweetness balance. You miss how long a wine stays on its lees. And lastly, you miss the consequences of site and place.”

**B**ill Hooper’s arrival in Oregon was planned at least as thoroughly as Frey’s, albeit on a shoestring budget and with no immediate prospects of vineyard ownership. Trained in the Pfalz, he had considered remaining an American ex-pat for the sake of riesling. “But in pouring over climatic and soil data from every major winegrowing region in the US,” he says, “I became convinced that Ore-



Bill Hooper of Weinbau Paetra

gon’s Willamette Valley had everything I was looking for climatically. And there is an abundance of basalt in the Willamette Valley”—the reason why Forst (in the Pfalz) boasts its nation’s priciest vineyard acreage—“that the Germans would kill for.” In founding Weinbau Paetra, Hooper was able to negotiate fruit contracts that permitted him to personally farm every block and row. “The basic approach,” he maintains, “is to work your



ass off in the vineyard to achieve grapes whose fruit doesn't require correction." Hooper is miffed that "Oregonians who live and die by pinot noir clones show annoying indifference to clonal availability of riesling," but happy to be working with the time-tested Clone 90 that was unveiled exactly a hundred years before his arrival by the very Pfalz institution where he received his training. Judging by monoclonal micro-vinifications at Chehalem, this old stalwart outperforms the Geisenheim clones that prevail in Oregon and that elbowed out Oregon State's 1970s Alsace imports.

Hooper favors ambient yeasts because "I like the *battle-royale* effect of various strains slugging it out. As one temperature, nutrient and alcohol window closes, another opens. I don't sulfur the musts but let them oxidize a bit so that at least some of the vineyard yeasts might have the opportunity to contribute to the ferment." But it is the management of soil, canopy and crop load that Hooper thinks exerts the greatest influence on his wine's ultimate balance. Only rigorous restoration and invigoration of the organic matter in the vineyard soils, he insists, can ensure enough nitrogen for satisfactory spontaneous fermentation without resorting to additives. "Pulling leaves is good for air flow," he acknowledges, "but too much sun exposure leads to thicker skins, undesirable tannins, less fruity and floral aromas and sunburn," not to mention the smell of petrol. "Finding balance in this regard is difficult and requires a lot of detailed hand-labor, but is achievable. And an ample crop load helps to delay sugar accumulation until the grapes reach phenolic maturity, all the while retaining acidity."

Ironically, Hooper hasn't yet felt that he could bottle a balanced riesling that would qualify back in the Pfalz as both legally and typically *trocken*, but his most successful efforts from sites in the Chehalem Mountains, the Eola-Amity Hills and Carlton have managed to achieve something akin to the supportive "hidden sweetness" of which German riesling is so strikingly capable (even if too few German growers recognize its virtues any longer!). There is one utterly dry Paetra bottling, but an unorthodox one. "O," for orange: It's a riesling fermented on its skins and whose fascination is far removed from mere fashion statement. And it's a striking reminder that the future of riesling in Oregon is likely to exhibit a stylistic diversity, including a range of finished alcohol and residual sugar that will make most other riesling-growing regions look straight-laced. ■



James Fry with his Vizsla, Brix, in Trisaetum's Ribbon Ridge riesling vineyard.