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UCC Grows Farther South

SOWI uses Medford custom-crush facility Pallet Wine Company as a teaching winery for out-of-area students

By John Darling

The Southern Oregon Wine Institute (SOWI) at Umpqua Community College (UCC) in Roseburg is expanding its teaching platform to take in the Rogue Valley. The classroom? Pallet Wine Company in Medford.

SOWI, which has many students living in the Rogue Valley (Medford-Ashland), has taken the step of making Pallet—a custom-crush facility located 100 miles south of UCC campus—the teaching winery for the area.

On Oct. 31, SOWI, in collaboration with Pallet, more than cracked their books in Wine Production 101, with students and teachers crushing seven tons of Merlot donated by Freed Vineyard—co-owner Pam Freed is enrolled in the program. The resulting wine will help fund the wine program's growth.

The Halloween weekend event gave local students hands-on experience without the long trek to Roseburg.

The bottling—about 320 cases of wine—will be sold to fund a teaching winery and event center on the UCC campus. The center is a \$7.5-million endeavor, says SOWI Director Chris Lake, but, even in the recession, fundraising been surprisingly successful.

The picking of the grapes in October got the hands-on support of UCC President Blaine Nisson, UCC Vice President of Instruction Ross Tomlin and Director of the UCC Foundation Dennis O'Neill.

The students' winemaking at Pallet's facility—which has drawn 14 client vineyards this inaugural season—will include all facets of the process, even label-design and marketing the wine they made.

“You're not going to survive in the wine industry unless you know what takes place in the whole chain of winemaking, which is driven by the customer's needs,” Lake said.

SOWI's new presence in the Rogue Valley makes sense, not just for students' convenience, but also for financial reasons.

“It's economical in the Rogue Valley to grow wine. Land is inexpensive here—less than \$5,000 an acre—compared to the Willamette Valley, which is \$40,000 and up,” Lake noted.

During the winemaking project at Pallet, students were assigned a multitude of tasks, including sorting grapes, climbing inside stainless steel tanks to clean them out, scrubbing cask bungholes with a sulfur solution and testing brix and temperatures in bins and barrels.

SOWI students are hardly typical. Elisabeth Grunwald, a Medford mom of three and an intern at Agate Ridge Vineyard in Eagle Point, took a break from brix testing to express how she appreciates the vast knowledge of SOWI teacher Rebecca Ford, who came here from New Zealand.

Grunwald says she welcomes “this great avenue” at Pallet, which is literally in her own neighborhood.

“We have a lot of distance education at SOWI, but, of course, [when it comes to winemaking] you're not going to learn a lot out of a book,” Grunwald said. “You have to do it. And it's great we finally got something in our own area.”

Student Dwight Griffin of Glide—east of Roseburg—raises trees and cattle on his family's land and has become fairly convinced that growing grapes has a dependable future in Oregon's agricultural scene.

“It's a steady industry, with double-digit growth and a good climate for Pinot Noir, which is developing as a varietal of choice around the world,” said Griffin.

Another student, Valis Renfro, noted, “It's a good program for students like me who are working full time.”

Pallet's winemaker and partner, Linda Donovan, said the project “lets students come and see what it's like in a commercial winery. It's different hearing about wine analysis and then actually doing it and everything else, including driving a forklift, seeing how the press works, doing basic chemistry, moving barrels.”

Pallet is housed in a vast historic building of 21,000 square feet and serves as the winery for a growing number of Southern Oregon vineyards, providing full-service winemaking, storage, lab, wine education and marketing, not just to the region but to other parts of the U.S.

John Darling is an Ashland writer.