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Irrigation project driving Red Mountain expansion plans

Kristi Pihl - Tri-City Herald

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Red Mountain is poised to expand its footprint on the wine-making world, and it's all because of water.

Specifically, Yakima River water from a Kennewick Irrigation District soon-to-be finished system.

The region's acclaim is centered on its ability to produce Cabernet Sauvignon — the top wine sold worldwide — ripening the heat-hungry grapes even in the coolest years.

But the land also receives among the least rain of any wine-grape growing area in the state. So the promise of more water is driving expansion.

British Columbia's powerful Aquilini family bought 670 acres from KID in an auction last year. Duckhorn Vineyards of St. Helena, Calif., planted its 20-acre estate vineyard earlier this year.

Frichette Winery opened 10 months ago. And Shaw Vineyards, one of Red Mountain's largest growers, has planted the last 150 acres available at the 300-acre Quintessence Vineyards.

New wineries are under construction — including Upchurch Vineyard, owned by DeLille Cellars winemaker Chris Upchurch and his wife, Thea, for the 500-case winery's members.

Grow tubes, sheltering baby wine grapevines, can be seen across the 1,400-foot hillside. By the end of next year, most of the remaining land suitable for growing wine grapes will be planted.

Property owners have a good incentive to plant now because they will start paying their portion of the \$18 million cost of building the intake station, pipelines and reservoirs that make drawing on the river to irrigate 1,785 acres possible next year.

Red Mountain, between West Richland and Benton City, is Washington's smallest growing area. The plantings on the south side will only reach about 2,800 acres, locals say.

Aquilini Red Mountain Vineyards, now the largest landowner in the growing area, expects to plant its vineyards in April, said Barry Olivier, president of Aquilini Brands. They plan to create top-tier wines and sell grapes, as well.

The Aquilini family, including Luigi Aquilini and his sons, Francesco, Roberto and Paolo, might be best known for owning the Vancouver Canucks of the National Hockey League and Rogers Arena. They paid \$8.3 million for the land and another \$7.6 million for their part of KID's Yakima River water project.

"Our ongoing site-by-site evaluation continues to confirm our initial belief that this terroir is capable of producing world-class wine, and since some of the very best Washington wines I've tried originated from Red Mountain, it's easy to understand where the excitement lies," Olivier said.

"This (American Viticultural Area) is magical."

SOMETHING SPECIAL

Red Mountain microclimate makes for spectacular wines

Consumers have big expectations when they see Red Mountain on the label, growers say.

The spectacular taste of the grapes made a convert of Keith Pilgrim, co-owner and winemaker at Terra Blanca Winery & Estate Vineyard, who grew up outside of Napa, Calif.

Red Mountain grapes on average are sold for three to four times more than the state average, Pilgrim said. The wines also score high on the ratings that wine consumers and sellers use.

"If people are willing to pay that, then they must feel that it is worth something too," he said.

Those grapes are used by more than 60 Northwest wineries to make premium wines. The core flavors, structure and depth are created in the vineyard, and Pilgrim just tries not to screw it up, he said.

The taste is also what drew Tim and Kelly Hightower to the area. When the collaborating winemakers were tasting wines before opening Hightower Cellars in 1997, they discovered Red Mountain grapes were one thing in common with the wines they liked the most.

Dick Boushey, a respected Grandview grower who manages a number of Red Mountain vineyards, including Duckhorn's new estate vineyard, said the area's small size helps make it marketable in an industry driven by reputation, prestige and past accolades.

Duckhorn's choice of Red Mountain is significant, since the company is known for looking long and hard for the best place to create a specific type of wine.

Although Duckhorn just planted, its debut 2012 vintage of Canvasback Red Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon will be released nationwide this fall.

Even when its vineyard is developed, Duckhorn plans to continue to use grapes from other Red Mountain growers. That's part of the company's model.

The premium market isn't saturated yet, and Red Mountain growers have been able to find homes for premium fruit from recent plantings, Boushey said.

But the newly planted acres will make expanding more into the national and international markets critical.

That's something that Duckhorn and Ste. Michelle can do because they have the infrastructure and marketing clout, he said.

It would be the healthiest way for the local wine industry to continue to grow because the Northwest is fairly saturated with wine.

MANAGING GROWTH

Red Mountain has a close-knit community of winemakers and growers, who despite being competitors, collaborate on how best to manage growth and protect the investments each have made.

They've succeeded in changing the minimum lot size from one acre to 20 and developing a master plan for the growing area that was adopted into the county's comprehensive plan by Benton County commissioners in March 2013.

Pilgrim said they recognize wineries are like sheep — they do better huddled together.

When he came to Red Mountain in 1993, maybe 250 to 300 acres of wine grapes had been planted. Hedges was just pouring its foundation, and Col Solare wasn't even in the crystal ball.

Most farmers were growing a diverse mix of crops, including alfalfa, cherries and apples.

The first grape vines were planted in the 1970s. The original wine grape growers on Red Mountain — the Williams family with Kiona Vineyards, Jim Holmes of Ciel du Cheval Vineyard and Patricia and David Gelles of Klipsun Vineyards — had laid a strong foundation of quality that others have been able to build on, Boushey said.

Less than a decade ago, the state Department of Natural Resources transferred water rights to property it owns on Red Mountain and leased it to growers for vineyards, said Tim Hightower, who also serves as president of the Red Mountain AVA Alliance. Other existing water rights also were transferred.

Red Mountain growers made a decision to market and sell their grapes to small, premium wineries, Boushey said.

Col Solare opening on Red Mountain in 2007 put a stamp of approval, Boushey said. Tuscany's Antinori family's desire to partner with Ste. Michelle Wine Estates to open a winery and plant an estate vineyard meant they considered it a great growing area.

That opened up some people's eyes to Red Mountain's potential, Boushey said. Since then, the remaining land has been filling quickly.

Property owners along Antinori Road are paying the cost to pave and extend the road by nearly one mile, said Dan Ford, Benton County's public works director and county engineer.

The road, which will be one lane in each direction, is currently being designed, Ford said. The county plans to build the road this year.