2007 Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year:

Elk Cove Vineyards

Excerpts from a story by Andy Perdue



HOW THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST WINERY OF THE YEAR IS CHOSEN

The winery of the Year is selected by a panel of industry judges based on a set of criteria, including longevity, quality, reputation, industry involvement, facilities and other considerations the judges deep important. A winery may win the award only once.

Adam Campbell is all about passion. For his family, for his parents — and especially for Oregon wine.

The winemaker and co-owner of Elk Cove Vineyards in Gaston, Ore. — our 2007 Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year — grew up at the feet of the Oregon wine industry's pioneering giants, folks such as David Adelsheim, Dick Erath, David Lett, Dick Ponzi and his parents, Joe and Pat Campbell.

"I remember going to growers meetings and being dragged along to wine events with all of those characters," said Adam, 36, who was 3 when his parents moved to northern Yamhill county in 1973, planted a vineyard in 1974, and launched Elk cove in 1977.

"In some ways, its humbling and gives me perspective. I have total respect for what my folks and other pioneers did," he said. "And yet, there's so much more work to be done."

Today, many of Adam's best friends are other second-generation winemakers, including Luisa Ponzi, Jason Lett and Alex Sokol-Blosser. And among those he most respects and relies on are Lynn Penner-Ash, Laurent Montalieu and Ken Wright, part of the second wave of winemakers who pushed the quality of Oregon wine to the next level in the '80s and '90s.

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Adam learned his winemaking in the vineyard and the cellar, just as his father did. But the business is very different now. Instead of family members handling all aspects of the business, Elk Cove relies on sales and marketing people, an assistant winemaker and a cellarmaster. Adam sees this as a maturation of the entire wine industry.

"I'm really fortunate to have a group of folks passionate about wine, who want to work to help me build up Elk Cove," he said.

Among its 30,000 cases of wine produced annually, Elk cove's focus is on four varieties: Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc and Riesling.

Adam crafts five Pinot Noirs. About 80 percent of it is the Willamette Valley blend, which he calls his most important wine. At $25, it's often the first Elk Cove red customers will be exposed to on store shelves, in restaurants or at the winery. Additionally, he crafts four vineyard-designated Pinot Noirs: Windhill, La Bohéme, Mount Richmond and Roosevelt.

"For the single-vineyard wines, we do a lot of hand work in the vineyard," Adam said. "We make three thinning passes to really fine-tune the crop. Yields are always under two tons per acre. That's important because these wines need to be super-concentrated."

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"I would be happy to put Oregon Pinot Noir up against any in the world."

– ADAM CAMPBELL

Before he became Elk Cove's winemaker, Adam spent three years in vineyard management and development. The viticultural side very much remains his focus today.

"I spend as much time in the vineyard as I can, trying to grow perfect fruit," he said.

The better fruit, he figures, the more hands-off the winemaking can be.

With Pinot Noir, I'm a purist about gentle handling and unextracted techniques.

"I really want to hang the grapes out there and get perfect fruit. If that means waiting through rain, then that means waiting through rain. We have rain scares even in good vintages, and people can jump the gun out there. If you pick too early, you'll make good wine. But you won't make great wine."

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In his winemaking and in life, Adam is nothing short of philosophical.

"One thing about wine: You only get so many vintages. You only get 30 chances at it in a lifetime."