

Summer 2010

From the Field to the Bottle

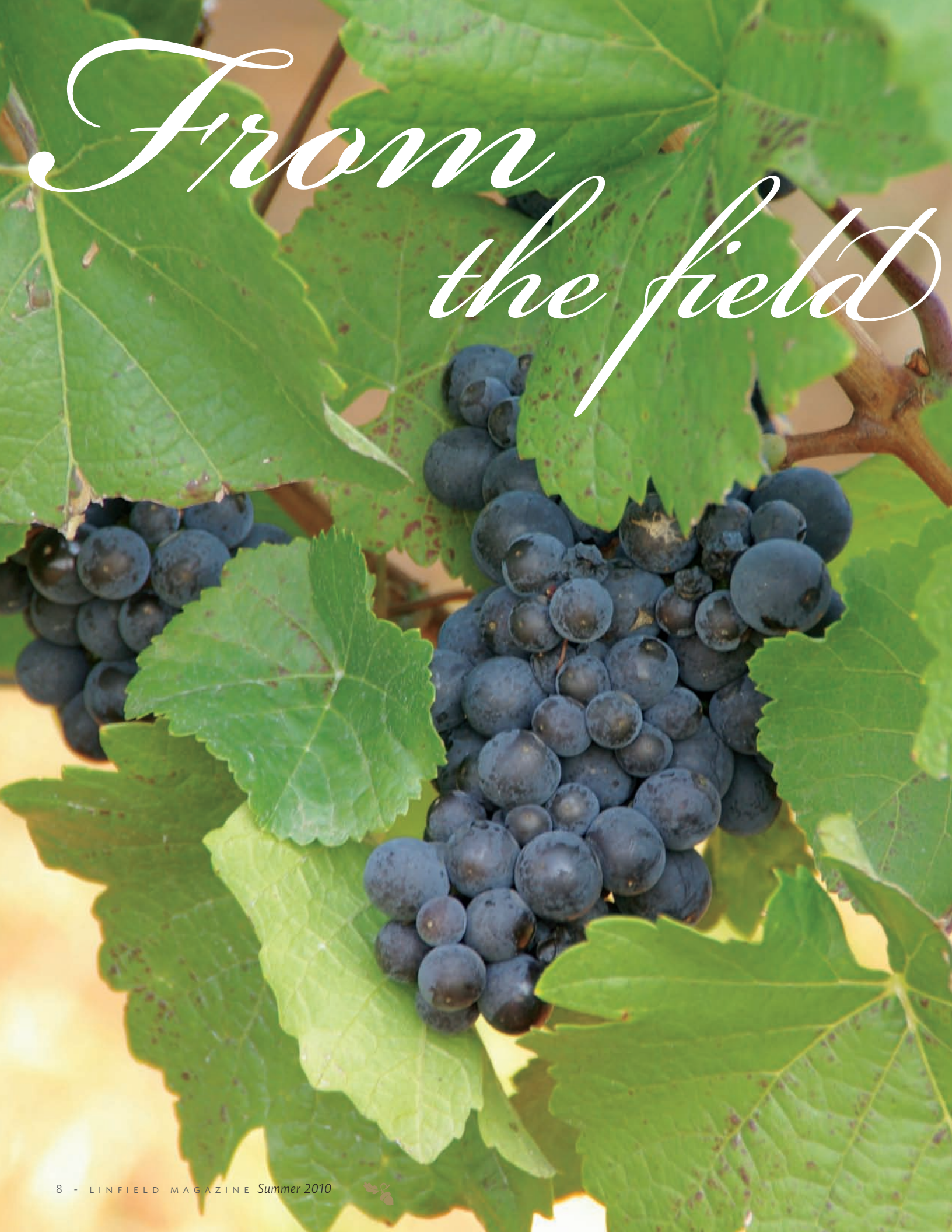
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Recommended Citation

Mileham, Mardi (2010) "From the Field to the Bottle," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol7/iss1/8

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From the field



to the bottle-

It's a warm summer afternoon in the Willamette Valley. You sit high on a hill, with a spectacular view of a vineyard and the valley below, a patchwork of fields with myriad shades of yellow and green. A hint of golden light marks the late afternoon sun. You tip your glass, noting the color and aroma of the wine. A swirl, a sip. You swish the wine around your mouth and savor the taste.

A day spent in the Willamette Valley tasting different wines can be an intoxicating experience, both literally and aesthetically.

Few people understand the intense, demanding work that it takes to create the wine. Wine growers spend days sweltering in heat and shivering in bone-chilling cold. Growing grapes and making wine is hard, with the outcome often dependent on the whims of nature.

When Chris Norman '10 and Jeff Voth '10 signed on for an internship at Vista Hills Winery, they weren't sure what to expect. What they got was a journey that took them into the vineyards on hot September afternoons and cold, wet November mornings. Over eight months they got an inside look at what few others see, from picking grapes, to helping with the crush, fermentation, filtering, bottling, labeling and marketing. They learned how to describe a wine to potential customers who ranged from novices to connoisseurs. They learned how to compare similar vintages, as well as explain how wine is made. They even stepped into the roles of winemaker and produced a barrel of rosé.

This is their journey.

The practical and the theoretical

On a blistering 90-degree September day Norman moved down the rows of pinot noir at Vista Hills Vineyard eliminating second crop grapes, those that grow late and won't produce high quality fruit by harvest time. Most of the grapes were still green, pale against the deep purple of the pinot clusters in the final weeks of ripening on the vine. Norman, a political science major, clipped the green fruit, dropped it to the ground and moved to the next row.

This was the second year for the internship program at Vista Hills, owned by John and Nancy McClintock. The program was conceived and is directed by Martha Karson, former professor at





Chris Norman '10 eliminating second crop grapes.

Michigan State University and now coordinator of the Clint Foundation at Vista Hills. She has developed a curriculum that combines practical and theoretical experiences covering three aspects of the wine industry: harvest and production; hospitality and tasting; and marketing and distribution. The internships give students a hands-on understanding of the wine industry and career opportunities.

Students work in the tasting room and at special events such as the McMinnville Wine and Food Classic and a fundraiser for Habitat for Humanity. They also conducted a marketing and distribution research project for the winery, Voth said.

Because Vista Hills is a relatively new winery, most of its sales are through the tasting room, he said. The students researched vineyards and wineries of similar size and levels of production to develop a list of potential distributors who could market and distribute the wine.

"This internship was unique in the fact that we worked at the vineyard and winery as our schedules allowed and then conducted our research project separate from that," said Voth, who has a business management degree with minors in math and studio art. "Because I had just taken a marketing class before I started, the project allowed me to see the transition from the books to an actual business atmosphere. I was able to apply the language and terms that I had read about."

The crush

Voth and Norman had plenty of "hands-on" experience, from picking the grapes to sorting them for the crush. Vista Hills and Panther Creek wineries work closely together on the crush and bottling processes. Fruit is taken to Panther Creek and dumped into a large funnel which moves it onto a conveyer belt. There Voth, Norman and others discarded



Jeff Voth '10 spent a cold, wet November morning picking late fruit for a project that allowed him and Chris Norman to try their hand at winemaking.

the grapes that weren't ripe, showed signs of noble rot, mold or simply didn't meet the quality required for the region's storied pinot noir. After the grapes run through the destemmer, the fruit is dumped into large open bin poly containers for open bin fermentation, moved to the winery floor and punched down daily, then returned to the press to extract the "free run," which is then moved into huge stainless steel containers. Once the juice is drained off by the pressing process, the skins have to be shoveled out before juice is returned to continue the fermentation process. All of these activities became part of every day life for Norman and Voth.

An idea is born

Late in the harvest, Dave Petterson, Vista Hills general manager and winemaker, noticed fruit ripening in a section of the vineyard that was not expected to bear grapes. Instead of just dropping the fruit and wasting it, he proposed an experiment – picking the marginal fruit and allowing Norman and Voth to try their hand at making rosé.

On a cold, wet November morning, with the first major storm of the season gathering over the Coast Range, Norman and Voth met several Vista Hills and Panther Creek staff and volunteers to salvage all the fruit they could. Thus began the "Operation Rosé" project that would guide the remainder of their internship.

Waiting game

As the wine continued fermenting, Norman and Voth focused on staffing, serving and selling wine in the tasting room and working on the distribution project.

"People always have a good time wine tasting because everyone is happy," Norman said. "I can't always answer their questions, but it's fun to talk with them."

Voth said working in the tasting room helped him overcome some of his shyness. "Everyone is really relaxed and it's a family atmosphere," he said. "This is unlike most other internships. It can be hard work sometimes, but you are learning some practical skills that can be put to use anywhere."

Filtering, bottling, labeling

By mid-April, it was time to filter, bottle and label the rosé. Under the watchful eye of Petterson, Norman added sugar to try to balance the acidity of the wine while Voth stirred with a huge paddle. They added part of the 10-pound bag, took a taste and decided to add the rest.

The second round of filtering goes straight into the bottler. Norman monitored the bottles as they filled and handed them to Voth, who corked each bottle by hand and moved it down the line. Karson, Petterson and other volunteers added the Operation Rosé labels, along with the government-required



From left, fruit is dumped into stainless steel containers; Jeff Voth takes a break from shoveling skins out of the containers following the pressing process; following the filtering process, the wine is tasted one more time before the bottling begins; Chris Norman pours tastes of wine into glasses in preparation for the technical tasting.

warning about alcohol. Bottles were checked for clarity and then packed in cases. One 60-gallon barrel yields 25 cases of wine.

Taste test

Operation Rosé made it into the bottle just 12 days before a technical tasting, in which it was compared against four other wines.

Each taster was given a sheet containing background information on each wine including the vintage, residual sugar, type of grape, type of container, alcohol content, total production and bottling date. The scoring criteria, based on aroma, flavor, appearance and overall impression, were worth up to 20 points in each category.

While everyone's taste differs, Operation Rosé held its own among the five wines, sparking surprise among the experienced winemakers who worked with Norman and Voth throughout the process.

"Rosé can range from bone dry to cloyingly sweet and there's a market for all of them," Petterson said. "Balance is the key – making sure the sugar is in balance with the acid. Given the marginal fruit we used, I didn't give this much chance of working, but I knew we would learn a lot. I am pretty surprised at the results." On the web: www.linfield.edu/photogallery. 🍷

– Mardi Mileham

The future

Jeff Voth landed a part-time job at the Panther Creek tasting room and is considering a return to school. He is also looking for work that will allow him to combine his business major with his art background. The internship taught him the importance of a strong employee base, which translates into loyal customers and a good product.

"The most valuable aspect was the ability to simultaneously grow as an individual at the same time Vista Hills Vineyard is growing and establishing itself," he said. "We were able to see how an emerging business finds itself within a market and ultimately how I can find myself in future positions."

Chris Norman plans to take a year off before heading to law school. He is interviewing for positions at wineries near his home in Washington and has also been offered an internship at the Washington Attorney General's office.

"I am really appreciative of my internship – the timing, the well-roundedness, the people," he said. "Operation Rosé was by far the most valuable aspect of my internship – it was a unique experience. People in the wine industry are generally happy. The employees, the owners, the customers, all love participating and that really made it for me."

