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## Umpqua Valley, Oregon

William "Rusty" Gaffney

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## Umpqua Valley, Oregon

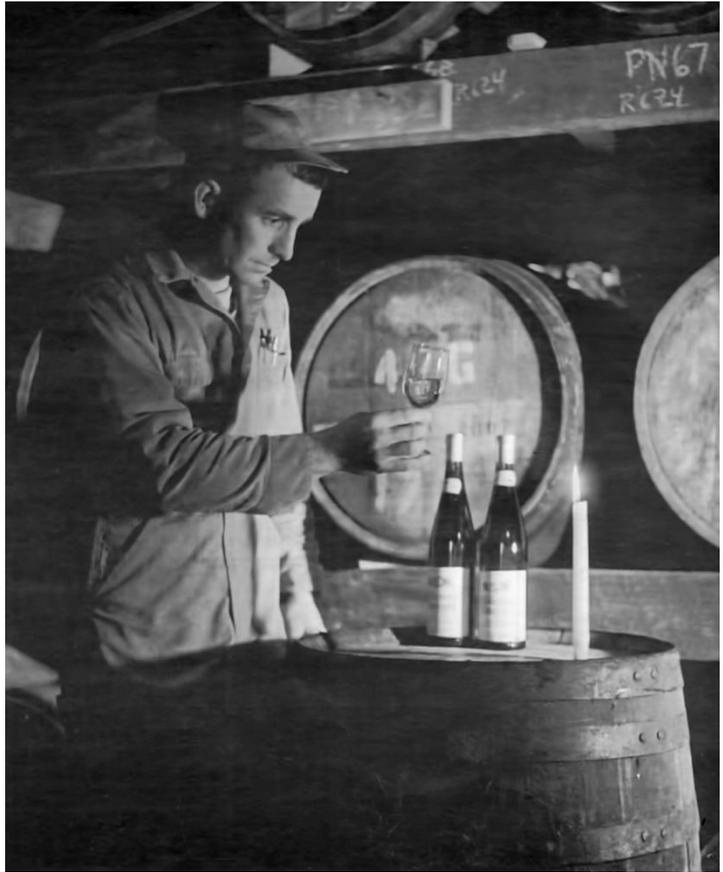
H. Bruce Smith, who writes the blog, Umpqua Valley AVA News ([www.umpquavalley.blogspot.com](http://www.umpquavalley.blogspot.com)) has offered some information about Richard Sommer, which has also been widely reiterated in the wine press. Smith has created the website, [www.forestgroveoregonpinotenvy.com](http://www.forestgroveoregonpinotenvy.com) to refute Forest Grove's claims. Although DeMara and Gale offered me invaluable verification of Sommer's achievements, it is important to first review what has been written about Richard Sommer in the most plausible wine literature over the last twenty-five years.

Richard Sommer is widely considered the founder of Oregon's modern wine industry. Growing up, he made wine at home and attended University of California Davis, graduating with a degree in agronomy, and later studying range management at University of California Berkeley. According to Paul Pinterich in *The Boys Up North* (1997), Richard Sommer left California in the late 1950s to establish HillCrest Vineyard on the site of a 40-acre old egg farm in the Upper Valley of the Umpqua, northwest of Roseburg. Adolph Doerner, whose family planted wine grapes in the Umpqua Valley in 1888, assisted Sommer with the first plantings. Sommer was particularly interested in seeking out an appropriate climate for White Riesling and Pinot Noir. Before settling at HillCrest, he had conducted detailed studies of the weather in areas of the Umpqua Valley where table grapes were being grown successfully. Roseburg stood out because it had the requisite amount of sun to ripen grapes, possessed enough coolness to prolong the growing season, presented minimal threat of frost, and had well-drained soils.

Sommer first planted grape vines in the Umpqua Valley of Oregon at HillCrest (also appears as Hillcrest) Vineyard in 1961, the first post-Prohibition *Vitis vinifera* planted in Oregon. The original HillCrest plantings were put in the ground in 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1968, and included Pinot Noir among the reportedly 35 grape varieties planted there.

Sommer also acknowledged the potential for wine grape growing, and in particular Pinot Noir, in the Willamette Valley to the north, and he referred to the wine pioneers who arrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s as “the boys up north.” Dick Erath, who was a classmate of Sommer’s in a course at the University of California Davis in 1967, credits Sommer for encouraging him to move to the Willamette Valley. It has been reported that David Lett and Charles Coury visited Sommer at HillCrest Vineyard before establishing their vineyards in the Willamette Valley, but according to Diana Lett (David Lett’s surviving spouse), neither Lett nor Coury knew about Sommer before moving to the Willamette Valley.

Sommer has been portrayed in the literature as an iconoclast, described as brilliant by many, but decried as a loner and eccentric by others. Some have called him “erratic, stubborn, quirky and a little weird.” More favorable impressions have also been forthcoming, including “energetic, with a subtle wit, and a keen sense of observation.” He loved nature and the outdoors and devoted himself so fully to that passion, he had no time for marriage and children.



According to the book, *Vineyard Memoirs* (2004), written by Kerry McDaniel Boenisch, a Douglas County Public Meeting was held in 1971 with the topic, “Prospects of a Grape and Wine Industry for Oregon.” Charles Coury, David Lett, Dick Erath, Ray Doerner and Richard Sommer were in attendance. Sommer reportedly said, “Here in Roseburg we have a perfect climate for growing certain types of wine grapes such as White Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. I moved to Roseburg in 1960 and in 1961 I planted 4 acres of eight varieties of wine grapes. I was in full production in 1966, making 6,000 gallons of wine. In 1961 I started with a mother block of eight varieties including Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, White Riesling and Pinot Noir.”

Anthony Dias Blue (*American Wine: A comprehensive guide*, 1988), stated that Sommers planted initially in 1961, using cuttings from the Napa Valley he brought to Oregon from California, and “moved to a rustic beadand- bat winery and expanded his vineyard to include Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir in 1963.” However, one source, *The Winemakers of the Pacific Northwest* (1977), states, “Sommer planted Pinot Noir from the beginning.”

The HillCrest Vineyard winery was bonded in 1963 (Oregon Bonded Winery 44), the same year Sommer released his first wine, a Riesling. We know he had commercially bottled a Pinot Noir-labeled varietal wine as early as 1967. Dyson DeMara still has some bottles in his possession as shown in the photo below. This was a first for Oregon, and preceded the first Pinot Noir released by David Lett in 1970 at The Eyrie Vineyard (labeled “Spring Wine”) and the first Pinot Noir commercially produced by Charles Coury at Charles Coury Vineyards (although the exact date is undetermined, it was certainly after 1967).

I asked noted Pinot Noir scholar, John Winthrop Haeger, who wrote both *North American Pinot Noir* (2004) and *Pacific Pinot Noir* (2008), to weigh in on the birthplace of Pinot Noir in Oregon since his published writings have focused on the Willamette Valley of Oregon and do not reference Richard Sommer. Here is his response. “I think it is accepted fact that Sommer planted Oregon’s first Pinot Noir in modern times, at Hillcrest, in 1961. We know for certain that his first vines went into the ground in 1961, and we ‘think’ Pinot Noir was among the varieties he planted in the first go, but he was white variety-oriented, so I suppose it is possible that Pinot Noir was not planted until a year or two later.”

Even Charles Coury, who was not known for his modesty, acknowledged that Sommer preceded him to Oregon, and is quoted in *Vineyard Memoirs* by his sister-in-law, Betts Coury, as admitting, "He (Coury) was the second person to make a decent wine in Oregon behind Richard Sommer."

With that as background, the following historical information was relayed to me by Phil Gale, many details of which were independently corroborating and embellished by Dyson DeMara. This proved to be invaluable information, since little documented information about Richard Sommer appears in the wine literature.

Phil Gale grew up tending orchards in Southern California. This background served him well, although he had no training in viticulture when Sommer hired him in 1975. Gale met Sommer in 1970 while he was working in a local mill and journeyed to Sommer's vineyard to buy wine. Sommer became his mentor, teaching him vineyard management and winemaking, and Gale was to become a devoted friend who worked for Sommer for thirteen years, eventually becoming the vineyard manager and assistant winemaker at HillCrest Vineyard. Their relationship was not always sublime, and Gale, who admits to being bullheaded, regrets responsibility for being fired at least a dozen times. In every instance, however, Sommer would call him the following day asking, "When are you coming back to work?" Gale grew to revere Sommer, and when we spoke, Gale became quite emotional to the point of tears while reminiscing about Sommer and his many accomplishments.

Gale emphasized to me over and over, "Everyone absolutely loved the guy. I never heard anyone say anything negative about him." Gale described him as gentle, generous and extremely respected by the Douglas County community in Umpqua Valley. Although admittedly eccentric (in a good way), and Bohemian, he was a prominent, admired figure whom the locals counted on for wine at a time when there were precious few other sources in that small southern Oregon locale. Neighbors would flock to HillCrest Vineyard at the end of the growing season, reveling in the harvest and participating in the picking of the grapes. Many would make regular visits throughout the year to buy wine as well.

Sommer was of German-Swiss heritage and his father was a scientist. His mother was from Ashland, Oregon, located at the southern end of the Rogue Valley, and his grandfather had a vineyard there. His grandfather's success gave Sommer confidence that winegrowing could be successful in southern Oregon. Sommer graduated from the University of California Davis in 1957 and upon arriving in Oregon, worked in the Douglas County assessor's office.

Sommer first established his vineyard in 1961 with cuttings obtained in 1959 from Louis Martini's Stanly Ranch Vineyard in Carneros, California. The only grape variety not obtained from Carneros was Zinfandel that had proved itself in the local vineyards of Ray Doerner and was obtained from the Doerner property. The original vines were rooted in 1960 in the Winston area of the Umpqua Valley and transplanted by Sommer to his property in 1961, the same year he assumed title of the 40-acre ex-egg farm near Roseburg in Douglas County. The property was owned by the Conns, former area land aristocrats of the 1800s who lived on the site.

Because of the varied climates and complex mix of landscapes of the region, the Umpqua Valley (see map below) proved to be suitable for growing both cool and warm climate grape varieties. When Sommer arrived, there was no significant history of winegrowing to draw on, except the successful plantings of Ray Doerner (whose family started Oregon Bonded Winery 7) and a few others nearby. As a result, Sommer planted numerous varieties of *Vitis vinifera* as well as seeded and seedless table grapes, seeking to find grapes that could thrive at his site. DeMara recalls that 35 varieties were planted at HillCrest Vineyard.

Gale emphasized, however, that Sommer was focused most specifically on Riesling and Pinot Noir, harboring a special love for the latter. The marketplace demanded that he rely more on Riesling initially, because there was little interest at the time in Pinot Noir as a distinct varietal.



Sommer chose a plateau on his property at an elevation of 850 to 900 feet to plant his first vineyard. There was a good layer of topsoil down 3 to 4 feet underlain with sandstone. Gale's recollection and Sommer's master planting map from 1962 supplied to me by DeMara (see below) indicate that in 1961 Sommer planted a total of 3.5 acres, consisting primarily of White Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Gewürztraminer, and Pinot Noir (rows 5,6,7 and 8 in the vineyard). There were 50 vines in a half row, making the initial plantings of Pinot Noir about 400 vines. All the Pinot Noir was Pommard clone. Trellising was Geneva Double Curtain. Additional White Riesling was planted in 1962 (1.4 acres) and 1963 (2.1 acres), bringing the total vineyard acreage to 7 acres by the end of 1963.

Further plantings of Pinot Noir and White Riesling and tiny amounts of other varieties (including Semillon, Sylvaner, Sauvignon Blanc, Malbec and Gamay Noir) followed in 1964 and 1968, all in larger blocks than in the first plantings. The 1964 plantings were established in an area north of the original vines in what had been known as the Fraun Vineyards after the German who had previously owned that land. DeMara notes that the 1968 plantings of Pinot Noir vines which included UCD 18 selection, are the oldest remaining Pinot Noir vines on the property, and included UCD 18 selection, some of which remain. Pinot Noir was also planted, managed and sourced by Sommer on adjacent properties owned by others including Vern Anderson who bequeathed his vineyard to Sommer upon his death in the late 1970s. Sommer eventually farmed a total of 50 acres of vineyards at HillCrest Vineyard.

Sommer's farming was organic minded, but fungicides were employed out of necessity when sulfur spraying proved inadequate in some vintages. The vines were dry farmed, enabled by the adequate rainfall in the area (Gale recalls as much as 35 inches a year). Rain was always a threat at the end of the growing season, but Douglas County often benefited from a couple weeks of Indian summer that propelled the ripening process. Although forty or so neighbors picked the grapes at harvest in the early years, Sommer eventually employed a small well-trained crew of workers to perform the task.

Conifers were planted on the property on lower ground that rose up to the bench where the grapes were established. For years, Sommer sold the conifers as "you cut" trees at Christmas to supplement his income.

One of the biggest challenges to farming grapes at HillCrest Vineyard was the ravenous birds who had a special liking for Pinot Noir. A number of defenses were used including 12-gauge shotguns, propane cannons and taste deterrents. In 1975, Sommer came up with the idea of using radio-controlled airplanes painted to simulate hawks. This turned out to be a very effective deterrent. Netting was finally employed despite its added cost to the the additional labor required and the expense of the nets. Gale cleverly devised

a method of fusing the individual rows of nets, creating a circus-style tent over multiple rows.

Sommer was a rather diminutive figure patrolling his vineyards, only 5'6" in height, and often wore a signature beret and blue coveralls. Gale notes that Sommer had almost a "Buddhist reverence for nature." He always kept a notebook with him and chronicled his every vineyard activity in detail. He was an inveterate note-keeper and his pockets were always filled with his writings. He was also obsessed with weather monitoring including measuring the sun's radiation, and his weather acumen bestowed on him a "sixth sense" of when to pick his grapes. DeMara still has many boxes of climate records from Sommer's past.

Sommer was also frugal. During one vintage, the crew was bottling splits and Sommer insisted on cutting the corks in half, doubling their usefulness! He refused to buy any equipment to replace what he could repair himself, not only to save money, but because he truly loved old equipment and enjoyed tinkering, repairing, and jury-rigging it. For example, Gale recalls his fashioning a wooden worm gear for the bottling line.

The first commercial HillCrest wine, a Riesling, was released in 1963, and the first commercial Pinot Noir came in 1967. DeMara reported that a visitor to Sommer's house recalled seeing and being served bottled Pinot Noir from as early as 1963, while Gale dates the first Pinot Noir to 1964. In the formative years, Pinot Noir was blended with some Gamay. There was little market for Pinot Noir at the time and most of Sommer's early success was built on a blend of Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon vinified with residual sugar and named Mellow Red that was sold in gallon and half-gallon jugs. Other red blends, Umpqua Red and Dago Red, were also produced for a short time. Early on, elderberry wine was also a component of Mellow Red, but this was stopped after wine authorities discovered the practice. Mellow Red was still in production when DeMara acquired the property in 2003.

Sommer's HillCrest Vineyard Pinot Noirs were inconsistent, often a victim of the vintage climatic vagaries. The 1970, 1978 and 1979 wines benefited from warm weather and these Pinot Noirs were said to be "amazing" by Gale. There was little recognition for the wines within Oregon, but the distributor for HillCrest wines raved about them publicly. Gale was emphatic to me in his praise of Sommer's Pinot Noirs, but admitted that the wines were "spotty" in some vintages.

Sommer has been credited in the literature with being the first in Oregon to put the name of a grape variety on the label of his wines, but this is inaccurate and there were others who preceded him. Botrytis was not unusual in Sommer's vineyards, and in 1978 he crafted Oregon's first modern era ice wine. He also produced sparkling wine at HillCrest Vineyard.

Interestingly, Sommer's wines were fermented in a cement pit, bucketed into a press and raised in barrels. In the case of Riesling, whiskey barrels were used, imparting an unusual flavor to the wines. The Riesling was styled in a Moselle fashion with high acidity (0.9 g/100 ml) and some residual sugar (2.5 g/l). With Pinot Noir, grapes were usually de-stemmed, but occasionally whole clusters were crushed or added back for added astringency. Although punch downs were used, Sommer also employed a technique in which the cap was allowed to drop on its own, up to three weeks after the initiation of fermentation. Called flavonoid reduction, this extended maceration produced high tannins, but when the cap dropped, the tannins would soften appreciably. The grapes were usually picked at 23° to 24° Brix. Typically, an alcohol level of 13% was achieved, sometimes with the benefit of added sugar. Elevage of Pinot Noir took place primarily in French oak barrels, with some Oregon oak barrels included.

Although initially Sommer worked with very rudimentary winemaking equipment, he had the resourcefulness to repair it when it broke. Until 1965, his winery was housed in a former tiny egg storage room. In 1975, a 10,000 square-foot winery was built on the property, and the egg storage room became a wine library vault. Gale, who helped built the winery, fondly recalls sitting in the rafters of the partially built winery at lunchtime with the construction supervisor, Bud Anderson, and enjoying Sommer's wines.

The Willamette Valley had a market for Sommer's wines, but tiny Roseburg (about 11,000 people at the time) could not support HillCrest as it expanded. Production in 1966 of 6,000 gallons had reached 30,000 gallons by 1987 with Riesling and Pinot Noir being the biggest sellers, and Sommer turned to a distributor to move the wines into markets outside of the Umpqua Valley. Sommer had a business sense and originated the idea of wineries offering barrel tasting tours to attract consumers.

Dyson DeMara took over HillCrest Vineyard in 2003. He had met Sommer in 1999 and spent time with him both before and after assuming control of the winery. Regretfully, Sommer's sister consigned many of Sommer's records to trash after the winery was sold. She has kept boxes of undeveloped photographic film that Sommer, who was an avid photographer, had accumulated. Some records remain in DeMara's possession, but DeMara has not had the time to thoroughly research them.

When the winery was sold in 2003, much of the original plantings were dead, primarily from the fungus, *Eutypa lata* (Eutypa dieback disease). DeMara pulled out most of the original 1961 plantings in 2004, including all the Pinot Noir (he retained a few removed Pinot Noir plants for archival purposes), leaving some Chardonnay, Riesling and Sylvaner. Of the original vines rooted in 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1968, 13 acres remain at HillCrest Vineyard, primarily consisting of the 1964 plantings.

Sommer never sought out recognition for his remarkable career, leading several writers and friends to remark over the years that he had not received the acknowledgement he deserved. He never exhibited any malice to those who found him eccentric. Toward the end of his career, he was a bit remorseful, saying, "I regret that I never tooted my own horn." Sommer passed away July 28, 2009, at the age of 79. A memorial was held in his honor on September 27, 2009. The Letts were unable to attend but Diana wrote DeMara and offered her condolences, "My husband David always enjoyed his friendship with Richard, stretching over 40 years, and we respected Richard's position as the first person in Oregon to grow Pinot Noir. Although I visited with him only a few times over all the years we shared as 'Oregon Wine-Folks,' I will remember Richard with affection and respect."

Largely due to the efforts of Dyson DeMara and others, Sommer has finally received the long-overdue recognition he deserves. A House Resolution ordered on May 20, 2011, by the 76th Oregon Legislative Assembly, commemorates both Oregon wine industry pioneer Richard Sommer and the 50th anniversary of the planting of the first Pinot Noir vines in Oregon. A copy of the resolution follows.

## A-Engrossed House Resolution 4

Ordered by the House May 20  
Including House Amendments dated May 20

Sponsored by COMMITTEE ON RULES

### SUMMARY

The following summary is not prepared by the sponsors of the measure and is not a part of the body thereof subject to consideration by the Legislative Assembly. It is an editor's brief statement of the essential features of the measure.

Commemorates Oregon wine industry pioneer Richard Sommer and 50th anniversary of planting of first pinot noir vines in Oregon.

### HOUSE RESOLUTION

1  
2       Whereas Oregon this year will celebrate the golden 50th anniversary of the first planting of  
3 pinot noir vines in Oregon; and  
4       Whereas Richard Sommer was the founder of HillCrest Vineyard, Oregon's oldest estate winery;  
5 and  
6       Whereas Richard Sommer was the first post-Prohibition wine pioneer to come to Oregon from  
7 California with a vision to produce world class wines from pinot noir and other varietals; and  
8       Whereas Richard Sommer began using the first stainless steel tanks in winemaking in Oregon  
9 in 1963, giving birth to modern Oregon winemaking; and  
10       Whereas 50 years ago Richard Sommer planted Oregon's first pinot noir in Roseburg, Oregon,  
11 and this noble variety has since become the national and international icon of the thriving Oregon  
12 fine wine industry; and  
13       Whereas Richard Sommer co-founded the Oregon Winegrowers Association in Roseburg, Oregon,  
14 in 1965; and  
15       Whereas Richard Sommer bottled the first commercial pinot noir in Oregon with the historic  
16 1967 vintage bottling; and  
17       Whereas Richard Sommer died July 28, 2009, at age 79; now, therefore,  
18 **Be It Resolved by the House of Representatives of the State of Oregon:**  
19       That we, the members of the House of Representatives of the Seventy-sixth Legislative Assem-  
20 bly, honor Richard Sommer and the 50th anniversary of the first planting of pinot noir vines in state  
21 history and express our gratitude and admiration for the vision and pioneering leadership of Richard  
22 Sommer in the development and growth of the Oregon wine industry.  
23

Richard Sommer is held in high regard by the Umpqua River Valley community and has received a prominent place in the Douglas County Museum of Natural & Cultural History in Roseburg. For those with curiosity, the Museum is currently offering an exhibit titled "Wine: A 10,000 Year History," which traces wine from its earliest roots in the Middle East to the Umpqua River Valley, "America's last great undiscovered wine region." Certainly, "undiscovered" is an apropos description of Richard Sommer's contributions to Oregon's rich wine history.

Visitors are welcome at HillCrest Vineyard where one can view bottles of Oregon's first Pinot Noir and see Pinot Noir vines dating to 1968. Look in on the website at [www.hillcrestvineyard.com](http://www.hillcrestvineyard.com). to see HillCrest's current wine offerings and to plan a visit.