

# Benton-Lane

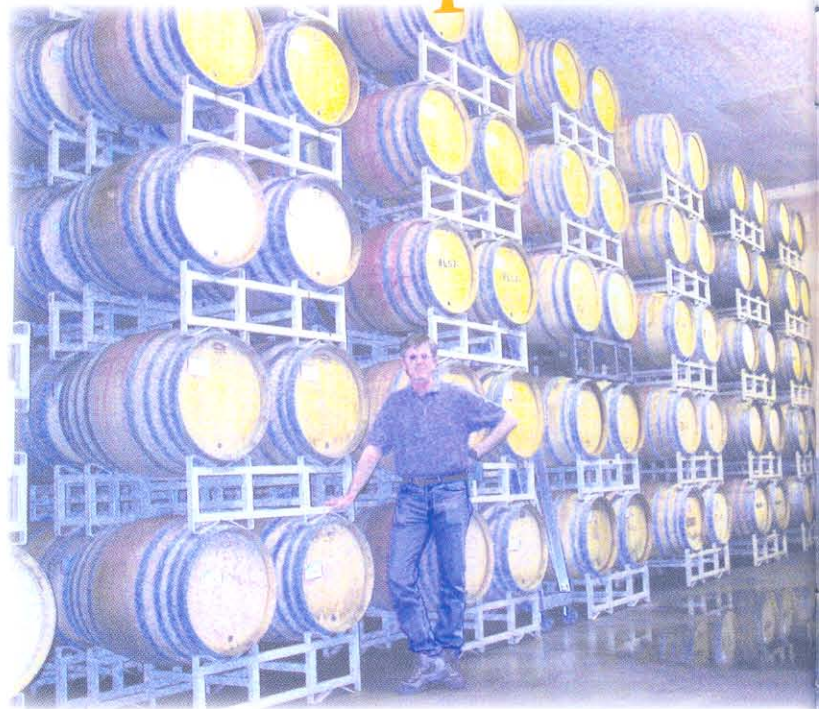
## Pinot for the People

**S**teve Girard believes in the power of Pinot. “I always thought that Pinot noir was the ultimate destiny of the human palate,” he says—only half jokingly.

As owner of Benton-Lane Winery in Monroe (northwest of Eugene) Steve is in a unique position to help his fellow humans achieve their organoleptic destiny. “People often flirt with Pinot noir,” he says, “I want to get them to actually drink it!”

Accordingly, Steve has a simple goal for Benton-Lane. “We want to make a wine that is easily accessible—both stylistically as well as in price—so that people can actually afford to drink Pinot noir and enjoy it. This will allow access to a whole bunch of people who have probably never tasted Pinot before.”

From the beginning of Benton-Lane, low-cost, high-flavor Pinot noir was the focus—in part because of the potential Steve saw in the site.



Benton-Lane brings Pinot noir into focus for value-oriented consumers.

After having built in California a family business called Girard Vineyard, Steve began looking to Oregon as a potential place for making Pinot noir.

## Resveratrol Is Benton-Lane's Pinot Reverberations: the Healthiest in Oregon?

For some totally unknown reason, Benton-Lane's Pinot noir wines consistently test among the highest in the world for the presence of resveratrol.

Why is this interesting? Because resveratrol may be a powerful cancer fighting agent, as well as having beneficial affects on arteriosclerosis and heart disease. It may be the case that the more resveratrol you consume, the healthier you are likely to be.

“One day I got a call from a Professor Le Creasy at Cornell University,” recalls Steve. “He asked if I was Steve Girard and if I owned Benton-Lane Winery. I said

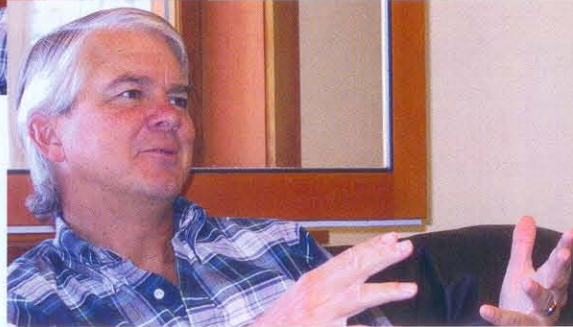
yes. And then he said ‘I’m calling to find out what you’re doing in your vineyard because your wine just broke my machine!’”

The professor had been testing the levels of resveratrol in food and wines, and Benton-Lane's Pinot noir had just recorded the highest level of any tested wine.

Normal levels of resveratrol in Merlot and Cabernet sauvignon are around 8 micromoles/liter. Pinot noir wines average a more hefty 13 micromoles/liter. But Benton-Lane's Pinot noir tested out at a whopping



Benton-Lane's owner Steve Girard (above) is passionate about making popularly-priced Pinot. His winemaker Gary Horner (below) is equally passionate about innovating in the cellar to keep improving the quality of Pinot noir that Benton-Lane produces.



On a visit in the early 1980s, Steve fell in love with a site called Sunnymount Ranch—nearly 2,000 acres containing a long southeast slope that seemed purpose-made for Pinot.

"It was just this fabulous place," recalls Steve, "in a warmer location than the folks up in Dundee, at a perfect elevation

above the fog-line and below the wind-line, and with an ideal aspect. If I were able to play God and move everything around with bulldozers, I wouldn't do anything differently!"

Purchasing the property in 1988 with the aid of partner Carl Duomani (of Napa Valley's Stags' Leap Winery), Steve embarked on a planting program that is only now nearly complete. "We have 127 acres planted now, with another 14 acres to plant," he says. "That will give us a production capacity of 21,000 to 30,000 cases—I don't want to get any bigger than that."

Along the way Steve and his vineyard managers have worked hard to develop the vineyard's potential. Starting with what he calls the "chocolate and vanilla" of Pinot noir clones, Pommard and Wadenswil, the mix has evolved to include all manner of own-rooted Dijon clones.

Likewise, vine spacing and trellis systems have evolved as Steve and his staff have become more familiar with the site. Following a careful program of soil analysis and balancing, plus a commitment to Low Input Viticulture and Enology (LIVE), Steve works hard in the vineyard to maximize quality fruit from all the different blocks of the vineyard.



40.9 micromoles/liter!

"I asked him if he tested it more than once and he said that they tested our wine six times with consistent results," says Steve. "I asked him what the second highest testing wine was and he said it was our wine from the previous vintage!"

Resveratrol is a flavanoid compound that occurs naturally in the skins of grapes. It has been demonstrated in the laboratory to have antioxidant properties that could help prevent arteriosclerosis and heart damage associated with cholesterol (no studies in humans have yet been completed). It has even been proposed as a key agent in the so-called "French Paradox."

Resveratrol has also been shown to have potentially impressive anti-cancer properties. In tests it appears to inhibit the formation and growth of cancer

tumors. But even more impressive, recent research by Professor Gerry Potter at De Montfort University in the U.K. indicates that resveratrol can be converted in the body into an enzyme called piceatannol, which actively fights—not just prevent—cancer cells.

Though many different tests are ongoing (and there is some contra-evidence that the compound may have adverse effects on breast cancer), it is generally agreed that resveratrol can help prevent cardiovascular disease and cancer.

All of this is good news for Benton-Lane—and for Oregon wines in general.

Resveratrol acts as an anti-fungal agent in plants. It is concentrated in the skins of grapes, and since the production of red wines exposes grape skins to fermentation, red wines contain far more resveratrol than white wines.

"In a nutshell," says Gary Horner, Benton-Lane's winemaker since 1998, "what we're doing is trying to balance the vine to improve quality. This involves different trellis systems to deal with the vigor of different blocks, managing cover crops and water resources—we do all kinds of things to fine tune quality."

Experimentation and learning are equally emphasized in the winery. Before 1998 Benton-Lane conducted all its winery operations at another facility many miles from the site. But in order to gain more control over wine quality, Steve built his own Pinot-dedicated winery adjacent to the vineyard.

"I believe that you can make one varietal in a winery better than you can make many different ones," says Steve, "because you have dedicated equipment designed and calibrated specifically for that one varietal. Of course, for us, that varietal is Pinot noir."

A practical example of this philosophy is a production innovation that Gary helped pioneer. In order to gain a more complete fermentation and better extraction, many larger wineries use automated punchdown mechanisms to break the cap of skins and seeds that forms on the top of the fermentation tank. Or they pump over juice from below to keep the cap wet. In either case, believes Benton-Lane, the process is too severe and can end up extracting too many harsh tannins.

Seeking a new approach, Gary adapted and refined a process of injecting a giant air bubble in the fermenta-

tion tank below the cap. With a precise injection, the bubble rises up over the cap, gently breaking it up, and flooding juice in and around the skins. This leaves far less tannin-laden seeds swimming around the tank, resulting in a more fruit-rich wine.

"For us—like anyone making Pinot—seeds are the enemy," explains Gary. "Too much seed tannin and you blow the program! We're trying to preserve as much whole fruit as possible getting into the fermenter, and then trying not to over-extract. With the air bubble we don't beat the seeds out of the berries and into the wine."

"We have many different programs in the cellar," says Gary, "including different fermenter sizes, different barrel woods, and different management regimens. The goal of all of it is to make a wine that has a lot of sweet fruit up front, tame tannins, and that is great to drink right out of the bottle."

And that is easy to afford.

"We started Benton-Lane with the idea of making a \$10-\$12 bottle of Oregon Pinot noir," says Steve. "And while we've done that, Gary and our vineyard managers have really raised the bar on quality."

And while Benton-Lane has added—when the vintage merits—two reserve bottlings, the focus remains on fruit-forward, wallet-friendly, tongue-pleasing, purely Oregon Pinot noir.

And, since Oregon's cool and wet climate is more conducive to the formation of fungus than warmer grape growing areas, our grapes contain naturally higher amounts of resveratrol.

Interestingly, tested amounts of resveratrol vary from vintage to vintage, though no one is sure why. All else being equal, though, Oregon Pinot noir will contain more of this antioxidant molecule than California Pinot noir. At least as far as resveratrol is concerned, Oregon Pinot noir would seem to be healthier than that coming from warmer locales.

It would also seem that Benton-Lane's Pinot noir will contain more resveratrol than anyone else's, even in Oregon!

Other wines produced throughout Oregon, including some nearby to Benton-Lane, did not test to have nearly as much resveratrol as Benton-Lane.

"It is all very interesting and exciting," says Steve. "Of course, we have no idea why our wine has so much resveratrol. We have no secret additives or techniques. Maybe it has something to do with the site—I always knew it was a special site, but I didn't know just how special!"

Exactly what all this means for the future is unclear. Certainly more research into resveratrol is needed to test and document the long-term affects of the compound on humans.

And while certainly no one is willing to claim that resveratrol—or Benton-Lane's Pinot noir—is a miracle drug, it does seem fair to say that resveratrol is a potentially powerful and healthful constituent of red wine. Just one more good reason to enjoy your next glass of Oregon Pinot noir!