

New owners bring exciting changes to old wineries

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The wines, they are indeed a-changin.'

Recently two old, established Oregon wineries were sold to ambitious new owners, and the resulting changes already have been dramatic.

When Chateau Benoit was purchased by Robert Pamplin Jr. in 1999, the winery was producing, to be polite, picnic wines. It was heavy on muller-thurgau, light on everything else. The focus of the winery shifted immediately to upper-tier pinot noir. The name eventually was changed to Anne Amie Vineyards, prices shot up, and today Anne Amie (the names of Pamplin's two daughters), is a big, flashy, important winery.

Last year, Salem's Redhawk Vineyard and Winery was purchased by John and Betty Pataccoli, and although it may take a while for any new winemaking style to take effect, they wasted no time making some marketing moves that are, to say the least, shocking.

Of a cold, rainy Saturday recently, I staggered into both tasting rooms to see for myself what was going on.

First, at Anne Amie Vineyards, just outside of Lafayette, the tasting room hasn't so much changed as what's being tasted: pricey single vineyard pinot noir, syrah and viognier from southern Oregon, big robust pinot gris and chardonnay. No muller-thurgau -- they still produce it, but it has remained under the Chateau Benoit label.

Two wines attracted me, partly for their prices, but also for their intent: not simple, just easy.

The Anne Amie Vineyards, 2005 Cuvee A Amrita, \$16, is a light, fruity white wine. A blend of largely muller-thurgau, but with riesling, chardonnay, viognier, pinot blanc and pinot gris tossed in for good measure.

Who leads in this dance? From the floral notes, I'd guess muller-thurgau and riesling. All those other grapes give it a bit of heft, but it remains an easygoing, pretty wine.

The Anne Amie, 2004 Cuvee A Pinot Noir, \$20, is a precocious, approachable pinot. Fashioned to drink now, it has all those wonderfully typical pinot noir aromatics, smooth texture and enticing flavors. It's no insult to say this is a great entry-level Oregon pinot noir.

Aromas of varnish and paint greet the nostrils upon entering the newly refurbished tasting room of Redhawk Vineyard, and with all the clutter removed from the windows, you can now see all across the valley. If the view has opened up, the wines still are in transition. The Pataccolis took over the winery in July, so we won't see any dramatic changes in the wines for a year or two. Except for one thing: No more cartoon labels!

Previous owner Tom Robinson was a jokester. He'd stand behind the counter, with his robin's-egg blue eyes and gritty smile,

proudly showing off Chateau Mootom, Great White (featuring a shark gnawing on a surfboard) or Bigfoot Blend. Some of his comic labels actually made Decanter magazine's "worst label" column, always with a wink.

But the cartoon labels are history. The only whimsical wine to remain on the list, and wisely so, is the Grateful Red, a light, fruity, straightforward pinot.

While plans are afoot to change the stable of varieties and blends, one grape that will hang around is dolcetto (with a good Italian name like Patacolli, it has to!). The Redhawk, 2004 Estate Dolcetto, \$20, is a fine expression of this wily Italian grape. With typical white-pepper spice and berry flavors, it's a light, food-friendly drink.

Malbec likely will be swallowed up in a Bordeaux blend eventually, but for now, you can taste it in the Redhawk, 2003 Rogue Valley Malbec, \$20. I've always been a fan of malbec, and this one is fruit-forward, smooth, a bit leaner than say, an Argentine version, but still with plenty of beef in the mid-palate.

And that's no joke.

Robert Mayfield's Between the Vines appears every Thursday in Weekend. Mayfield has reviewed wines for Northwest publications for 16 years and is the publisher and editor of the occasional newsletter The Wine Iconoclast. You can contact him at wineicon@aol.com or Robert Mayfield, P.O. Box 741, Ridgefield, WA 98642.

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