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## Hobby shared among friends

*Wine harvest provides ample time to catch up*

Story by ERIN MILLS | Photos by E.J. Harris

Retired doctor Bill Danner may not have been the first winemaker in Umatilla County, but he should be in the running for most dedicated. Any day of the week will find him puttering around his winery or vineyard, where he grows just about every wine grape one can think of.

"I've never sold a drop of wine," he said recently as he stirred a large barrel full of crushed pinot noir grapes with a wooden paddle. "This is not a commercial operation. It's more of an advanced hobby."

Danner grows cabernet, merlot, syrah, muscat and more in carefully tended rows on two acres of land in Umatilla, almost a stone's throw from the Columbia River. It's a good spot for grapes, Danner said, because the river moderates the air temperature, although he, like many grape growers in the region, has lost his share of vines to freezing.

Danner has had a passion for making wine for many years, but his hobby took a quantum leap after his retirement 12 years ago. He completed a viticulture course at Walla Walla Community College, built a new winery and started making wine in earnest.

"He's out there every day, even in the winter when it's cold and windy," said Kathy Metcalf, who has lived next door for six years. And, because Danner needs all the help he can get during harvest, his operation has brought an already tight neighborhood closer together.

"My husband and I have both picked," Metcalf said, "a lot of the neighbors get out and pick together and visit." The finished product, she said, is always welcome at Southshore



**Pinot Noir grapes hang on the vine as Erik Huxel of Umatilla picks the fruit recently at the vineyard of Dr. Bill Danner in Umatilla.**



**Dr. Bill Danner drives an ATV down one of the rows of grapevines at his vineyard overlooking the Columbia River during the recent harvest.**

"He just needs all the help he can get ... He's a one-man operation. It's our way of helping him, and he really wants our expert opinion on the wine."

Keith Metcalf

Neighborhood Association meetings.

Last Saturday was a good day for picking and Danner, zipping through his vineyard on a weathered four-wheeled ATV, carried pails of dark, sweet grapes from his picking crew (three teenage boys hired from Umatilla High School) to his friend Norman Clark, who manned a hand-cranked crusher/ destemmer. The resulting mixture, called must, will sit in a large blue barrel in a "cold-soak treatment" - Danner adds plastic bottles filled with ice - for three or four days before he adds yeast, which jump-starts the fermentation process.

The must sits for another 10 days or so. Then it is filtered and stored in a wooden barrel in Danner's wine cellar for two to three years, or until its ready to drink.

That's the short, easy explanation of what happens, anyway. The true journey from grapes to wine is a lot more complicated, but perhaps that is why Danner loves it.

As a former chemistry major and family doctor, Danner is at home with the scientific gadgets and chemistry of the craft. The refractometer, for example, is an interesting little device that measures the sugar content (also known as Brix level) of fresh grapes. A few drops of juice are placed onto a glass screen fitted into the small, cylindrical device. It is then directed to the sun and an orange indicator shows the juice's refractive index and sugar content.



Danner tastes a grape for flavor at his vineyard.  
Photo by E.J. Harris - East Oregonian

Danner also frequently tests his must for acidity and alcohol levels. He adds potassium metabisulfite to his must to kill bacteria and any unwanted yeast.

"You have to be exceedingly careful when you add sulfites, because some people are allergic to them," Danner said. "I use 35 parts per million, which is a very small amount."

He knows his grapes so well that he can give you a colorful history on each one. Syrah grapes, for example, originated in Iraq near the Black Sea area, and were one of the first grapes to be made into wine.

The best wine grapes for eastern Oregon, he said, could be cabernets or merlots, but he was reluctant to say for sure.

"You've touched on a very sensitive subject," he said. The purists in the business, he said, are passionate about which grapes should be grown in which climates or microclimates, and there is a lot of heated discussion on the subject.

But, from an observer's point of view, Danner's loving care is all it takes to grow great grapes. He said his true passion is watching his crop flourish and, of course, the finished product.

"My love is the growth of the grape," he said. "I really love to grow things."

His vines are healthy and bursting with gorgeous, delicious fruit. They are so good, it almost seems a shame to use them for wine.

Danner said that, after his many years of learning and experimenting, he finally feels ready to make something that really stands out.

"I'm striving now to produce a really top-notch wine," he said.

For Danner's friends and neighbors, his vineyard is a place to hang out, work in the sun and drink lots of free samples.

"He just needs all the help he can get," Keith Metcalf said. "He's a one-man operation. It's our way of helping him, and he really wants our expert opinion on the wine ... I enjoy him coming over and getting me to help him with something."

Dee Clark, another friend of Danner's said that although she has never picked, she is happy to attend Danner's tasting parties.

"The wine is delicious," she said. " He gets a lot of people - he's got a lot of friends - and it's a ball."