

get ready for grapes

by ruth berkowitz



Franco Marchesi, who came to Hood River via Italy and California, says his grandfather used to make wine, and that vino is in his DNA. Marchesi took over an abandoned apple orchard in 2001 and planted Italian grapes. Today, Marchesi Vineyards hosts the newest tasting room to pop up in the Columbia Gorge, and he attributes the success of his operations to the natural conditions in the area.

Marchesi, along with other vintners, has discovered the wine potential in the Columbia Gorge. A record number 33 wineries will be crushing 25 different types of grapes from Albarino to Zinfandel during the 2008 harvest. Wineries are sprouting up in the region because the rich volcanic soil and diverse climate makes the Columbia Gorge prime grape growing territory. The cool and wet western region is ideal for Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay, while the dryer and hotter eastern climate works well for Grenache, Rhone, Zinfandel and Syrah.

"The soil is like Northern Italy," Marchesi says, as he shows me his Italian-style cellar that was formerly an old chicken coop.

From the area's winemakers' perspective, the fact that their ingredients don't have to travel far before ending up in the barrel is a huge benefit. Moreover, being able to work with different types of grapes is attractive as well as challenging. Harvest, which takes place during September and October, is the culmination of all the efforts in the vineyards.

"If you do your winemaking well in the vineyard, you shouldn't have to do much to make the wine," according to winemaker James Mantone from Syncline, whose family vineyard in Lyle, Washington, specializes in the French Rhone-varietal grapes.

PHOTO BY BRIAN ROBB

