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Oregon vineyard developer finds his promised land in the Columbia Gorge

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After combing the Pacific Northwest, hitting up field engineers at his irrigation company for tips on land that might be available, kicking the dirt at countless sites but never quite finding what he wanted, a newspaper classified ad pointed David Brown to his promised land.

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A desire to make wine isn't motivating David Brown to take on this vineyard project. He says it's more about hortophilia, described by the late neurologist Oliver Sacks as "the desire to interact with, manage and tend nature."

"It was in the Capital Press," Brown recalled. "'For sale by owner. 200 acres with water. The Dalles. Vineyard/orchard potential.' Amazing."

That was a year or so ago. Today, the parcel, in the spare, rugged hills south of The Dalles, is well on the way to becoming one of Oregon's most ambitious vineyard developments. Several elements add up to make The Vineyard at 3 Mile unusual — its location, the grape varieties being planted there, and the business plan for putting the grapes to use. And then there's the man behind it.

"Ambitious is certainly the word," said Ben DiCristina, winemaker at Evening Land Vineyards in the Willamette Valley and a consultant on the project. "That's David. He's a visionary and he's interested in setting up something that will endure and will be seen as innovative for years to come."

Wine roots

Wine has a habit of seducing wealthy people to buy or build vineyards or wineries. It's probably not a stretch to say such investments are a substantial driver of industry growth. A mind-blowing sip of Burgundy — or maybe Bordeaux, Brunello, Napa cab or Dundee Hills pinot — and it's off to the races.

Brown's story is nothing like that.

"You know those, 'What are you going to be when you grow up?' reports you do in junior high school?" Brown said. "My report was I was going to be in wine distribution."

Brown, 62, got that notion from a Southeast Portland wholesaler of his youth, Roberti's House of Wines. It was across the street from the business his father worked at and would go on to run, Mitchell Lewis & Staver, an agricultural pump supplier.

"There was something just really magical about the importation of these products and the containers they would come in," Brown said of Roberti's. "And guys who worked there were either Italians or they were French and they spoke foreign languages and smoked cigars. And they wore these smocks that had obviously come from overseas. I just thought the whole thing was really cool. So the distribution business had been in my head since I was a child."

It knocked around there as Brown took over Mitchell Lewis & Staver from his father, in the early 1990s, becoming president and owner. He grew the company, focusing on water-system equipment and engineering and making acquisitions in California and elsewhere that would eventually extend its reach throughout the West.

Along the way, he bought and rehabbed an Inner Southeast building. Small independent wine distributors began to locate there, and Brown got to talking to them. With national brands gobbling up the attention of distributors, he saw an opportunity focusing on the high end.

"There were all kinds of brands underneath the big portfolios that needed representation — we could see that very clearly," he said. "Our goal was to really be an independent fine wine distribution company here in the state of Oregon, and that's played out well."

The wine business now employs 30 people, while the irrigation business has 160 workers. Clearly David Brown needed something else to do.

Tending nature

“Do you know the terms biophilia or hortophilia?” Brown asked. Brown had just read in the New York Times an excerpt from a book by Oliver Sacks in which the late neurologist described how “the love of nature and living things ... is an essential part of the human condition.” That’s biophilia. Hortophilia is “the desire to interact with, manage and tend nature.”

“I'm that,” Brown said. “I have this real love for living systems, and especially for plants.”

Thus The Vineyard at 3 Mile — a working name that might change — in a spot that “opens up a cornucopia of opportunities.”

The site is beyond the Columbia Gorge American Viticultural area, which is a cooler and wetter growing region, more akin to the Willamette Valley. Technically, 3 Mile is at the western edge of the Columbia Valley.

Vineyards aren’t unheard of in the area, but as managing viticulturalist Joe Cushman put it, “usually it’s just a few leftover acres in a corner of a cherry orchard,” the mainstay crop in the area. “This is different. Everything we’re doing here, from the plant material to how we’re approaching the diversity of the terrain, the layout of the vineyard, the consideration of orientation ... it's about finding the magic.”

To determine what to grow, the team, led by Edwin Martinis, general manager at Mitchell Wine Group, compared the climate and soils to winegrowing regions around the world.

“That was the starting point, then we worked back to what we thought would excite great winemakers truly interested in doing something special,” Martinis said.

That's because the goal isn't to make wine themselves, but to supply top-notch wineries in Washington, Oregon or even California.

Their research and discussions with wineries led them to varieties such as grenache, syrah and mourvede, red grapes common in France's Rhone Valley, as well as the Rhone whites clairette, roussanne and grenache blanc. Spanish varieties are there as well — the reds tempranillo and mencia, the white albariño. There are several others, including the more conventional cabernet sauvignon.

The vineyard is unfolding amid somewhat uneasy times for West Coast wine. Although Oregon wines sales have been humming along, the wider industry trend has turned stagnant. And even in Oregon there's concern that the balance between grape sellers and buyers might be tilting toward oversupply.

That's just one of the unknowns that will begin to be answered in three years, when a crop rises at 3 Mile.

"I personally think it will be very compelling," Di Cristina said. "But that's part of the game of course. We don't really know. But I think David's onto something out there, and that site and the way it's being approached has as good a shot as any."

AT A GLANCE

THE VINEYARD AT 3 MILE

Founder and owner: David Brown, who also owns and heads Mitchell Lewis & Staver, a Wilsonville-based irrigation company, and Mitchell Wine Group, a Portland fine wine distributor. The project team leader is Edwin Martinis, general manager at Mitchell Wine Group.

Employees: Mitchell Lewis & Staver employs 160, Mitchell Wine Group 30

Total site size: 200 acres

Planted acreage: 85

Grapes: A wide range of warmer-weather varieties, including several rarely planted in Oregon, including clairette, roussanne and mencia

Pete Danko
Staff Reporter
Portland Business Journal