

Former geology professor enjoys seeing plan to grow wine grapes come to fruition

Alan Busacca has long been fascinated with the land, having spent 25 years as a soil scientist and geology professor at Washington State University. But over the past decade, Busacca has discovered that studying the land isn't as satisfying as actually owning and working a piece of it.

In 2006, shortly after retiring from WSU, Busacca purchased a 160-acre parcel that was part of a 650-acre former dairy ranch in the Mill Creek Valley near The Dalles, Oregon, along the Cascade Range. The property reminded Busacca of his youth growing up in California's Sacramento Valley, with deep canyons flanked by majestic oaks and towering pines.

"I love places that are geologically active," Busacca says. "And here we have big volcanoes in sight of the property, all these streams and the giant Columbia River, and the drama of the Cascade Mountains. It's a beautiful area that really resonated with me in my heart."

So with the help of award-winning grape grower Lonnie Wright, Busacca turned a portion of this property into Windhorse Vineyard, which now sells grapes to approximately 15 wineries. It is a business perfectly suited for a geologist, who views land development in terms of eons, allowing him to understand the patience that is needed for wine-grape growing.

"You have delayed gratification in this business," Busacca says. "You plant a new variety, then have to wait four or five years until you see it come into its own and be fully productive. Then it ages for a year or two in the oak barrels, and then another year or two in the bottle. So you have to have patience and take the long view, or otherwise, you're in the wrong business."

It is a wait that Busacca says is well worth it. Sure, there are plenty of challenges along the way, including the winter freezes that can hit the area and the occasional Pacific Coast wildfire that can cause smoke damage to the grapes. But when Busacca gazes out over his property while enjoying one of the wines produced by the grapes that were grown there, he says the experience is immensely satisfying.

"We grow the grapes that make this beautiful wine that brings pleasure to people. That's a wonderful feeling," Busacca says. "When I stand on top of that property in the spring and see this sea of green leaves coming out, it just fills my heart with pleasure that we're doing this."

"No matter what the economic challenges or the disease issues or the market conditions, it's just awesome to stand up on top of a ridge and look out over a big chunk of land that you own and are responsible for taking care of. I just love that. There's nothing better."