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By [Carly Wray](#) on July 29, 2010

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The Real Dirt

How to launch a vineyard in your spare time (and survive)

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There's a version of Scott Elder and Stephanie LaMonica's story that goes like this: A young, restless couple falls in love with wine, and sets out for the wilds of Oregon to sow the earth with their dreams. They trade in cubicles for grapevines, they name bottles after beloved relatives; they learn lessons about faith, passion, and hard work.

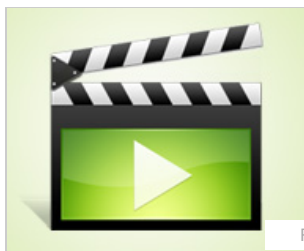


That version, however, omits the camper. And the debt. And the psychic toll.

"I'm going to come up with the 10 essentials you really need if you ever wanna do something like this," says LaMonica, laughing. "And one of those things is definitely a great therapist."

The real story of how [The Grande Dalles](#) vineyard came to be isn't all gauzy sunshine and romance, and it's better for it. Elder and LaMonica have learned all of the sacrifices required to build not just a vineyard, but a legacy, from scratch, and along the way redefined the great American adventure.

Related video



Stephanie LaMonica discusses the threat of fire to the vineyard during the hot summer months.

Born a farmer's son and trained as a chemist, Scott Elder was (and is) working at Intel when the itch to start a vineyard really set in. He'd fallen in love with wine as a graduate student studying abroad in France; 16 years later, on another international assignment, he knew he had to take the leap.

"I was working for Intel in Ireland, and was housebound during this long, dark winter," says Elder. To pass the lonely hours, he scoured the winemaking books his soon-to-be wife had given to him. The reading turned into internet research, and within a few months of short, cold Irish days, Elder was

searching Google Earth for available land in Oregon.

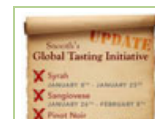
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"When you're married to someone who has a dream larger than life, it's hard to know what you're getting into," says LaMonica. In this case, the dream got them into a wheat field in The Dalles, a section of the Columbia Valley AVA, 90 miles from their home in Portland. They drove to the area directly after arriving in the states, hoping it would suit their needs. Epic land negotiations followed, and then a very tense search for the one thing that could make or break it all: Water.

"That was a giant financial roll of the dice," says Elder of the price of hiring a douser to search for irrigation water. The gamble paid off, though, meaning the land was theirs to buy, and to work. And *work*.

"Every weekend we would go out to develop the land, every evening that we could," says LaMonica. With no investors and no trust funds to speak of, the couple downsized everything possible -- got rid of cars, sought out tiny living spaces -- and continued their day jobs as they learned the ins and outs of planting a field of fruit, including how to install deer fences, manage rural electricity, prune crops ("I love that part, it's very Zen," she adds), and keep away grape-eating birds.

Beyond rushing from their offices on nights and weekends to their camper parked in a field over an hour away, there was the night their son was born, when the vines couldn't wait, and the birthdays that bent to the needs of the farm.

"It was our other baby," LaMonica says. "We wanted to make sure that we got it right." Part of that mission involved telling their story the way they wanted it told. A copywriter by day, LaMonica spent hours formulating a brand, and a blog, theuncultivatedlife.com, that would capture each step of their learning process, blemishes and all.

Two years and one brand new son later, an amazing thing happened: Grapes. Real ones. Riesling and Cabernet Franc and Sangiovese, lining the hills they'd first seen via the internet, 5,000 miles away. Though the harvest was meager (and steadily under attack by local birds), and they had no winery to speak of, the couple decided to make their first batch of wine, blended at their kitchen table. And they fell in love all over again.

"Plenty of people told us that we couldn't do it the way that we did," says Elder. "But we believed in us."

The Grande Dalles inaugural releases, available now via requests@thegrandedalles.com.

LEROY'S FINEST - 2009

100% Riesling

Hard cheese, wet stone, and citrus on the nose, this Riesling is bone dry with almost surprisingly refreshing acidity; key lime notes throughout.

GAMPO - 2008

80% Sangiovese, 17% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc

Gorgeous ruby in the glass, with rich black cherry and freshly-tilled earth on the attack. Juicy and ripe throughout; delicate tannins and a long, coffee-inflected finish.

HOME PLACE - 2008



12 Great West Coast Chardonnays

Chardonnay still rules the roost as far as white goes, and for good reason. It's a prolific...
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70% Tempranillo, 28% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Cabernet Franc

This is flat-out rugged, a frontier Tempranillo with rustic tannins, rich earthiness laced with hints of licorice, crushed white flowers, and tons of fat, red fruit.

Tags: Oregon

Comments

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Wanderlush-Tim

7

Like I posted on my Facebook page: Most people dream...and some live the dream. What an incredibly inspiring article for any wine lover who has even the merest hint of the agrarian spirit in them. Good stuff.

Jul 29, 2010 at 12:18 PM



IKAL 1150

54

Wonderful and congratulations on your first vintage!!!

Jul 29, 2010 at 2:01 PM



KGraynor

47

Great read, inspirational story

Jul 29, 2010 at 2:29 PM



Alwyn-Fitzgerald

1

Great story, very pertinent as I am in the process of starting up a winery in Wisconsin. The only disappointing part is that the story focused exclusively on the vineyard, not the winery. That's perfectly fine, but I was hoping to hear a bit more about their winery challenges. Based on my own experience, vineyards are a LOT of work and can be a huge money sink. The wine is such a great value-added product, that's what makes all the rest of the efforts worthwhile. Again, it was a very good story.

Jul 29, 2010 at 3:04 PM



Carly Wray

287

There's no winery yet, per se -- their big venture for now is the vineyard; the winery comes next! We'll definitely check in with them as they build in the winery in the upcoming years. I'd love to hear your story, as well. Am very interested in the challenges facing wine start-ups.

Jul 29, 2010 at 3:16 PM



BBQ Phil

7

I am curious as to what made them interested in planting Sangiovese versus something like Pinot Noir? And - please pardon my ignorance - but are they purchasing the Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon juice? I agree - great story and more information regarding the winery and production would be very interesting.

Jul 29, 2010 at 3:22 PM



Carly Wray

287

All of the varietals included in the blends are also grown at The Grande Dalles.

Jul 29, 2010 at 3:27 PM

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Guest

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