

BY ERIC DEGERMAN

**G**ino Cuneo grew up in San Francisco and the seafood business led him to Seattle, but his passion to bring Italian-style wines to the Northwest has him reaching across to Eastern Washington and down into Southern Oregon.

The unique approach and success in crossing borders show in the bottle, prompting Wine Press Northwest to name Cuneo Cellars its Oregon Winery of the Year.

"We say the grapes are apolitical," Cuneo said with a chuckle. "They don't understand county lines or state lines, and we try to accommodate them. But seriously, we see ourselves as more of a Northwest winery."

The growers he contracts with are among the most respected in the Northwest: Paul Champoux in Washington's Horse Heaven Hills, Jim Holmes at Ciel du Cheval on Red Mountain and Rob Wallace at Del Rio in Oregon's Rogue Valley.

Holmes and Wallace deal in Nebbiolo and Sangiovese, but there is some cutting-edge work at Ciel du Cheval, at Cuneo's request. In 2002, Holmes planted five dense acres of the first Brunello clone of Sangiovese grown commercially in North America. The first vintage is in barrel.

"Sangiovese has been tried in California with mixed results, and Nebbiolo has been found wanting, but I think in the Northwest, especially Eastern Washington, they will be dead-ringers," Cuneo predicted. "As for the Brunello, I don't know."

He crafts only reds, and his focus is on Italian varieties Nebbiolo, Sangiovese and "a dab of Barbera" from a clone new to the U.S., as well as Pinot Noir, Syrah, Bordeaux blends and a blend of Sangio and Syrah called Bricco.

Much of his 6,000-case production is done in blends that cross state lines and meet with success. Cuneo says the Two Rivers releases combine fruit "hugely structured" from the Columbia Valley with "soft and voluptuous" from the Rogue Valley. His prized wines, regardless of style, are bottled under the Cana's Feast label.

"My goal is to make the best wine," he explained. "I feel that Bordeaux wines are best when they are blended. And with Pinot Noir, I'm very judicious. I don't have a single-vineyard Pinot Noir every year. My idea is not to make a linebacker out of a ballerina, but the ballerina has to be fully equipped, so to speak."

The 2002 Cana's Feast Meredith Mitchell Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley, is well-built, earning a double gold in our 2004 Platinum Judging and gold at the Seattle Wine Society Competition.

His grandfather was from Liguria, Italy. "You could say was a professional winemaker," Cuneo said with a wink.

"When we moved to the Northwest, I found that as an amateur you could get first-class fruit," Cuneo said. "So I started out getting Mercer Ranch (now Champoux) fruit. We entered it into a contest and won best of show. I'd never won anything in my life before, other than fifth



JACKIE JOHNSTON

Gino Cuneo, owner and winemaker of Cuneo Cellars in Carlton, Ore.

place in the backstroke in sixth grade."

The late Cliff Blanchette, owner of Hood River Vineyards, mentored him for four years. In 1990, Cuneo crafted his first commercial vintage. In 1993, he and wife Pam bought the former Hidden Springs winery in the Eola Hills, which came with 20 acres of Pommard clone Pinot Noir.

On Sept. 15, 2001, he and his business partners opened their current facility, a destination winery in Carlton with Ken Wright Cellars, Lemelson Vineyards and Belle Pente Wine Cellars as high-profile neighbors. World events made for a rough start, but now Cuneo Cellars is open seven days a week with Italian picnic items, a bocci court and lunch service during the summer. And as is custom in some parts of Italy, guests are served samples of wine while seated at individual tables rather than standing at a tasting bar.

"We're incredibly blessed to be in this place and time," Cuneo said. "We've got access to great vineyards and different varietals and have all the resources at our fingertips."

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