Setting down roots in the idyllic Willamette River Valley, Oregon’s Pinot Noir country, two St. Olaf families are living a wine country dream.
ITNESS

By Greg Breining

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JARED CRUCE

WITNESS TREE PHOTO BY GREG VAUGHN
Late one Sunday summer afternoon nearly 40 years ago, Dennis ’61 and Carolyn Devine ’60 took a fateful drive north from San Francisco. Dennis worked for a pharmaceutical company and had to fly out to Saskatoon, Canada, the next day to monitor a clinical study of a veterinary antibiotic. Driving Highway 128 through the Alexander Valley north of Santa Rosa, they passed a little vineyard called Johnson’s.

“Carolyn saw some pretty cars in there,” Dennis says. So they spun around and drove in. The vineyard was having an open house and car show. The car that caught Carolyn’s eye was a forest green 1939 Jaguar, with a rakish hood and chrome headlights. The car may have drawn them in, but the vineyard itself made the real impression. The Devines can still recall joining other visitors as they spread a blanket on the ground, ate tasty cheeses, drank wine, and listened to a tiny orchestra. In the midst of it all, a cat ran through the scene, chased by three dogs and a passel of shouting kids.

In the sunny days and cool evening breezes of the Willamette Valley, Dennis Devine has found contentment at Witness Tree Vineyard.
“I said to Carolyn, this is so Rockwellian I can’t stand it,” Dennis remembers. “Someday, we’re going to do this.”

And so they did. In 1994, the Devines bought Witness Tree Vineyard, not only fulfilling their dream, but creating an outpost of St. Olaf alumni in Oregon’s Willamette River Valley near Salem. Their winemaker and vineyard manager, Steven Westby, is another St. Olaf grad. He and his wife, Sonja, raised three children — Nelson, Maren, and Swan — on the vineyard property and two, Nelson ’09 and Maren ’12, have graduated from St. Olaf.

Witness Tree Vineyard represents a territory blessed. Its 52 planted acres rise on a slope in the Eola-Amity Hills that faces east-southeast to catch the day’s first sun, when the morning is cool and moist. Up on the hill stands the vineyard’s namesake, a 250-year-old Oregon white oak with branches outstretched as if in benediction. Towering over the 100-acre estate, the oak was used as a surveyor’s landmark in 1854 and “bears witness” to the northeast corner of the property.

The vineyard is located in the Willamette River Valley, which cuts a wide swath through the western side of Oregon. Winters are mild and wet. Summers are made of cookie-cutter days — bright sun with highs in the 80s. Farms, orchards, and nurseries fill the valley one side to the other. Farms by midwestern standards seem small, broken by copses of trees and rolling hills. It is agriculture the way you imagine it used to be.

The moderate climate and mix of sedimentary and volcanic soils supports a small but thriving wine industry — tiny by the standards of, say, California, but renowned especially for its Pinot Noir, a temperamental thin-skinned cool-weather grape. It makes a delicate wine-lovers’ wine that contrasts with the heavier wines of California.

Out of this land, the Witness Tree Vineyard has carved a niche in markets across the country for its moderately priced wines, mostly Pinot Noirs, with a small selection of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, and Viognier.

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Dennis Devine and Carolyn Hanson met and fell in love at St. Olaf; he was majoring in biology and health sciences, she in English and American Studies. The U.S. Army drafted Dennis after he graduated, but he landed a job at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in “experimental psychology.” A clerk noticed that Dennis had taken a class at St. Olaf of the same name and thought the position would be a good fit, apparently ignoring the fact that Dennis hadn’t done particularly well in the course. After his stint in the army, Dennis returned to Minnesota, married Carolyn in a “Lake Wobegon” country church in Terrace, and, with their sons Daniel and David ’89 in tow, set off on a peripatetic life up the East Coast and then to California, where he monitored clinical research for the drug company Squibb.

At the time, Dennis didn’t know much about wine, except that he liked it. He even tried his hand at winemaking in his basement. “Because it had a wine cellar, I thought, what the heck — make wine. Actually, the first apricot wine I made wasn’t that bad. And everything else was awful. I never tried it again.” That is, not until he purchased his own vineyard many years later and hired fellow Ole Steven Westby.

Westby, in recounting how he ended up at Witness Tree,
speaks of coincidence — of “interlooping things,” “interconnection,” and “the circles that all of this encounters.”

He and Sonja began dating just after graduating high school. They grew up in Minnesota, he in Willmar, she in Spicer. Sonja told her cousin, Carolyn Devine, about her new crush. “Dennis and Carolyn heard about my first date with this cute guy who was going to St. Olaf, and they loved him before they ever met him.”

At St. Olaf, Steven majored in biology. In one of his courses, taught by biology professor Harold Hansen, who coincidentally had been Dennis Devine’s faculty advisor, Westby wrote a paper on the grapevine, a subject that interested him partly because his dad was an early devotee of domestic wines. “In the 1970s, no one had heard of Napa,” says Steven. Adds Sonja, “Not where we lived.”

Steven graduated from St. Olaf in 1983. He and Sonja, a College of St. Catherine graduate, married soon after. Steven needed a job and found one as a floor salesman for Haskell’s, a wine shop in St. Paul. The work further kindled his interest in grapes and wine, and he began to volunteer at the Alexis Bailly Vineyard in the town of Hastings.

He and Sonja solidified their interest in winemaking by visiting vineyards and wineries on a six-month backpacking tour through Europe. Steven then began a ten-year gig at Surdyk’s Liquor in Minneapolis, first as a salesman and then as a wine buyer.

All the while, at family gatherings on Green Lake in Minnesota, Steven Westby and Dennis Devine discussed their mutual interest in wine and the idea that, one day, Dennis would buy a vineyard and Steven would work with him.

After Squibb merged with Bristol-Myers and Dennis Devine was directed to fire his department, he quit. “I called Steve and said, ‘It’s time.’”

It has been 18 seasons. They’ve brought in 18 harvests. They’ve planted new acreage. They’ve battled mildew and root lice. They struggled with the death from ALS of their original winemaker, who taught Steven Westby what he knows about making wine.

On this day, Westby leads a tour of the vineyard, chugging up the slope in a six-wheeled Gator. He wears a ball cap from Hungry Jack Outfitters, a business in the Minnesota Boundary Waters owned by friends. He parks the Gator near the witness tree, midway up the slope. “We take very good care of the tree because we don’t want to change the name of the winery to Witness Stump,” he jokes.

Overlooking the property, Westby explains that vineyards do best on thin soils, where plants struggle to grow. “It forces the plant to focus energy on the fruit. It’s the sugars; it’s the acids; it’s all the good stuff that makes great wine.”

The soil itself traces back to Oregon’s ancient geology, beginning millions of years ago with the collision of tectonic
plates that created the Coast Range and Cascades, which embrace the valley. The eruption of mountains raised the seafloor and set off cascades of volcanism. Over time, the rocky landscape eroded, and glacial-era floods brought new sediments into the valley, leaving a “bathtub ring” of soil at about 350 feet above sea level, right through the waistline of the Witness Tree Vineyard. As a result, Westby has varied soils to work with.

“The geologic parts of this are very important to what makes the wine quality,” he says, sweeping his arm across the valley. Fruit from the marine soils is redder, more silky and satiny. Grapes growing in volcanic soils are blacker and earthier. “It gives me blending components by virtue of having both of those.”

His Estate blends “have a little bit of everybody,” he explains, mixing grapes from various locations on the property. For example, the Vintage Select is made from a combination of grapes produced on the best sections of the vineyard. Westby compares the result to many voices coming together in song. “To use a St. Olaf term, it’s like the St. Olaf Choir,” he says. “And then in the truly wonderful years, we’ll bottle up a little bit of each of those individual sections separately — three to four barrels, less than 100 cases, to capture the solo voices.”

Grapevines are notoriously fussy, and Westby is always considering ways to cut his reliance on pesticides. “Here at Witness Tree, we’re not an organic winery, but we’re very close,” he says. The vineyard is “sustainable,” conforming to the standards of LIVE (Low Impact Viticulture and Enology), a certification organization in Salem. Earlier this summer, Devine hired a goatherd to help thin the blackberries overgrowing the slope between two fields. Confined by a solar-powered electric fence, 40 goats chomped on the brambles while Monty the Llama guarded them from coyotes.

The work never ends. Today on the field above the Witness Tree, four field hands untangle vines and position them on the trellises to maximize their exposure to the sun. “Any shaded leaf is a parasite,” says Westby. “This speaks to the incredible

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amount of labor involved.” Grapevines require pruning, tipping, tying, shoot positioning, leaf pulling — more than a dozen visits to every single plant during the growing season. Depending on the width of rows, an acre may support more than 2,200 individual vines.

The quality of the grapes remains in flux during the growing season, says Westby. “It’s not until the harvest that you know what you have. It’s all about the fall — what happens in September. You want it to come together in perfect harmony at the end of the season.”

“Harvest is a lot of very hard work,” he adds, “but it’s exhilarating. It’s the promise of the new — what are we going to get? By virtue of having a good crew, it makes it fun.”

Last year was a case in point. After the late season of 2011, the vines greeted 2012 without much stored carbohydrate. They grew tiny clusters of tiny berries. “But from a winemaker’s point of view, that gets you all quivery,” says Westby. “Low yield, tiny berries — that’s exciting from a quality point of view. Not from an income point of view, but from a quality point of view, because now that vine during the rest of that growing season is using its energy on fewer clusters, tinier berries. Once we started to bring that fruit in, I knew right away it was going to be magic. From the moment it hit the press pan, I knew: Wow! This is going to be a phenomenal year,” says Westby.

Running a vineyard and winery, like the struggle of being an artist, actor, writer, or musician, is a labor of love.

Witness Tree hires a contractor to bring in a picking crew. But the vineyard also brings in “willing victims,” mostly young volunteers who wish to learn about wine. Last harvest, Westby’s older son, Nelson, helped out. So did Frank Heller ’11, a friend of their daughter’s and a helper from the previous year. “Consider this a month of your life that will evaporate,” Westby likes to tell the volunteers. “On the other side of harvest you’ll wonder, what the heck just happened. But it’s fun at the same time.”

Picking begins early in the morning, when the day and the fruit are still cool. The goal is to delay fermentation until the grapes have had a chance to sit for several days, leaching flavorful compounds into the juice. Harvesters clip the fruit clusters and gather them by hand into five-gallon buckets, keeping the grapes as whole and undamaged as possible. Pickers spill the buckets into bins hauled up and down the slope by two tractors. “We have an advantage here of being able to process almost instantaneously,” says Westby. “As one tractor is rolling up the hill, the other one is heading back down with the fruit. That fruit is being processed probably within a half-hour of being off the vine.”

Grapes are unloaded into a hopper, which shakes and spreads the fruit out on a sorting table, where everything other than ripe, healthy fruit is picked out. The remaining clumps of grapes ascend in an elevator and drop into the de-stemmer, which jettisons stems and drops the fruit into an open-topped fermenting tank that can hold more than five tons of grapes. (Grapes for white wines undergo an additional step: because wine takes its color from the grape skins, white wines are pressed first, and only the juice goes to the fermenter.)

In the fermenter, yeasts gobble the fruits’ natural sugar, converting it to alcohol. The reaction raises a “cap” of grape skins. Twice a day helpers punch the skins back into the fermenting juice with long-handled plungers. “It helps,” says Westby, “to have young backs around.”

After about two weeks, when yeasts have converted all the sugar to alcohol, Westby drains the free liquid from the fermenter. But the skins still hold a lot of juice, so they are shoveled — literally, with snow shovels — into the press, which wrings out the rest of the liquid.

The fresh wine then undergoes a “malolactic fermentation” as bacteria convert tart malic acid into a softer-tasting lactic acid. With a trace of sulfur dioxide to prevent spoilage, the wine is siphoned into oak barrels. At $800 apiece, the barrels, made of French oak, are another expense of winemaking. “American oak is really loud. You need to be putting a very big, bold wine into an American oak barrel or it will be overwhelmed by the oakiness,” Westby explains. “Subtle wines like the Pinot Noir or Chardonnay that we’re doing — it just would be overwhelming.”

Through winter, spring, and summer, the barrels sit on racks in the “cellar” (actually an air-conditioned steel building). Once a week, Cellar Master Heath Payne uncorks each barrel to check on the wine level. Any pocket of oxygen increases the risk that acetic bacteria will turn the wine to vinegar. So Payne tops off each barrel with wine as needed to replace losses due to seepage and evaporation — as much as 10 percent of the total, known as “the angel’s share.”

Days before the next harvest, Witness Tree contracts with a mobile bottler to put up 6,000 cases of wine or more (5,000 are Pinot Noir). And the barrels are readied for the next batch.

“We’re on the high side of a small winery,” Westby says. Witness Tree employs four field hands, two part-time hostesses who tend to visitors in the tasting area, and Payne, who also splits national sales calls with Westby. Carolyn, with a background in teaching and banking, serves as the vineyard’s corporate president and business manager.

Westby says he’d like to boost production to about 10,000 cases a year, but not much more, which would
Life on an Oregon vineyard may seem idyllic, yet even a near-perfect site in a near-perfect climate doesn’t add up to a fortune. Running a vineyard and winery, like the struggle of being an artist, actor, writer, or musician, is a labor of love.

“It’s very difficult to compete in a business with other businesses that don’t need to show a profit,” says Dennis Devine. “This is just fun for them. They’ve got all the millions of dollars they’re ever going to want and they just want the lifestyle.” In the nearly two decades the Devines have owned Witness Tree Vineyard, they’ve seen only two profitable years.

“We thought we’d be making a lot of money by now,” says Dennis. “And we’d have an office manager. And we’d actually get a salary. And we’d go on cruises — spend four months in Minnesota in the summer with the grandchildren. Doing things like that was the dream. Didn’t come to pass.

“But we look at it this way: We have eight or ten families in housing, food, and shelter. We’ve been their sole provider for these years. And that’s a good accomplishment. That’s a reward in itself.”

And there are the sunny days and the cool evening breezes that pour from the Pacific through the Van Duzer Corridor into the Willamette Valley. The Devines enjoy sitting on the front porch of the winery, watching day by day as the grapevines reach taller, until they obscure all but the roof of the red barn Dennis built on the other side of the property.

He recalls a similar moment of contentment early in the vineyard days. “We had been out here six months, I think, and I had been on the tractor mowing between the lanes. As I turned around up there to come back down a new row, there was Mount Hood out there like a marshmallow. I’m looking down — I’ve got on my sneakers and my blue jeans. For business I had a three-piece suit, wingtips, everything, you know. I said, do I want to go back to that? No. No way. I’m very comfortable here. I never was a farmer, but I became one.”

And he found a like-minded community of “farmers” who have done what he did, as much for the intangible rewards as for the living it affords.

Devine’s birthday is the Fourth of July. He just turned seventy-four. Each year he sets up tents and puts out toys for kids, and invites the neighborhood and friends and anyone else who might drive by with an afternoon to spare. “On my 65th, we had a talent show and we had those antique cars,” he says, watching the summer shadows lengthen. “Didn’t get a green Jag. But we did have people singing and dancing. We really have some nice parties.”

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