



The Ford family, left to right, Lowell, Pauline, Brad and Bethany.

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ILLAHE VINEYARDS / Dallas, Ore.

oregon winery to watch

When it comes to being good stewards of the land, many wineries talk the talk. Illahe Vineyards near Salem walks the walk. Right down to its name.

Our 2011 Oregon Winery to Watch is a family operation, led by Lowell Ford, who began planting wine grapes in 1983 and selling them to other wineries. In the mid-'90s, he planted Glenn Creek Vineyard in West Salem. Then in 2000, he planted Illahe, a 53-acre vineyard not far from famed Freedom Hill Vineyard. The name Illahe is a Chinook word for "land" or "soil." Winemaker Brad Ford, Lowell's son, likens it to a Northwest version of the French term *terroir*. For the first two harvests, the grapes were sold to nearby wineries, including Cristom, Evesham Wood and Bethel Heights. They still receive about two-thirds of the grapes each year.

Brad was a grant writer before becoming a winemaker, an odd career path but one that has been rewarding.

"People actually call me up to talk about winemaking," he said, chuckling. "Nobody wanted to know about my grant-writing work. Dad bought this property, and I saw an opportunity."

He studied winemaking at Chemeketa Community College near Salem, where Lowell helped to establish the

Northwest Viticulture Center and once served as dean of students.

"This is a dream job."

The winery's inaugural vintage was 2006, and Illahe's focus has been on Pinot Noir, which accounts for more than half of its 2,700 cases. The rest is divided between Viognier, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Grüner Veltliner, and Brad, 40, is adding a rosé made from Tempranillo. Only the Viognier is from purchased fruit.

The wines have been generally superb so far, with the 2008 Pinot Noir earning our top "Outstanding!" rating and the 2009 Viognier an "Excellent."

In addition to honing his winemaking skills, Brad also is focused on getting back to basics. The winery is been LIVE (low-input viticulture and enology) certified and Salmon Safe, not unusual for Oregon wineries. But Brad is taking it a few steps further.

"My main focus is on historical Pinot Noir production methods," he said.

This includes using horses instead of tractors in the vineyard, using wood instead of plastic or metal when possible and generally being less mechanical.

"I think it is important to avoid push-button winemaking and not just rely on machines and technology. Everybody knows how winemaking works with machines."

This includes relying on native fermentations, and he is even having some clay fermenters made and plans to bury them to see how they perform, pointing out that the ambient temperature of soil is perfect for fermentations. He plans to put his theories to the test with a few lots before moving forward. He also plans to dig a cave in the side of the hill at the estate and use only candlelight in it. He hopes to get to that project as early as next year, after the winery adds a tasting room and a patio for entertaining guests.

Illahe's success has primarily been within the family, with Lowell overseeing viticulture and sales and Brad's wife, Bethany, serving as national sales manager. Brad's mom, Pauline, helps during harvest and with special events.

Illahe's wines are available in 18 states, with the vast majority in the Portland and Salem markets. They can be found at such locations as New Seasons, Fred Meyer and Whole Foods, as well as such wine merchants as E&R, Liner & Elsen, Oregon Wines on Broadway, Vino, Avalon and Woodstock. In the Seattle area, Illahe wines are sold at Town & Country Markets, PCC Natural Markets, McCarthy & Shiering in Queen Anne and Bin 41 in West Seattle. — ANDY PERDUE



Illahe Vineyards

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Open by appointment.