

A Youth Spent in the Vineyard

PURPLE HANDS WINERY

D u n d e e

We were unaware of the winery called Purple Hands when we first arrived in Oregon (actually we were unaware of many of Oregon's great wineries before that first trip). The story of how we discovered Purple Hands and its connection to two of the legendary pioneers of Oregon winemaking, Ken Wright Cellars and ROCO, is why we found the Willamette Valley such an extraordinary place. As wine lovers will agree, the thrill of finding a great new winery is what makes a wine tour so much fun.

Our story starts at Domaine Serene—a very well known Oregon winery that Nick had long admired—where we first heard the name Ken Wright; this was purely by chance, luck, or destiny—whatever you want to call it. We were enjoying a tasting when we noticed the cover of a local wine magazine featuring a bottle of Domaine Serene next to one from Ken Wright Cellars.

We wondered: Who was Ken Wright? And why, if his wine was featured so prominently on the cover of that magazine, had we never heard of him?

We did some quick research and discovered that the *Oregon Wine Press* had recently featured Ken Wright on its cover and included a

long article about his remarkable success. We learned that his was a very highly respected name in Oregon wine.

Even though our time was booked solid with tastings and interviews, we headed over to the Ken Wright Cellars tasting room in Carlton. Once there, we were blown away by the wines and knew we had to feature this winery in our book. Ken himself wasn't there on that Sunday, so we made a note to come back when we could meet with him. Then, during the course of our tasting, we learned that Wright had named two of his vintages after his two sons and that one of them, Cody Wright, was also a winemaker, and quite a good one at that.

We couldn't imagine that Cody could be making wines as excellent as his father's, but we decided nonetheless to go for a tasting because it would certainly make for an interesting story. So, we left the Ken Wright Cellars and headed over to Purple Hands in the hills of Dundee, which was not so easy to find. At the time Purple Hands' tasting room was in a converted old farmhouse on a very dusty, only partially paved road. However, thanks to our trusty GPS (how did we ever find anyplace without them?) we arrived about 45 minutes





Cody Wright with his wife, Marque, and son, Tyrus.

before closing. (The tasting room has since moved to downtown Dundee.)

On that first visit, we were a little surprised to discover that this tucked-away winery was packed with patrons who looked like they'd spent the entire afternoon there, enjoying Purple Hands wine. After a quick tasting, the reason was obvious.

Though we'd loved Ken Wright's wines, we were equally captivated by the wines at Purple Hands, which had a distinct personality and point of view completely different from Ken Wright's, yet were quite stunning on their own. This modern fruit-forward wine was lush and drinkable, while also displaying an impressive

structure that would last for years to come. And it wasn't just the wine: the whole place felt like a tribute to a new brand of winemaking and a new generation of winemakers.

We were impressed with the artistry of the tasting room, which was both hip and welcoming. The distinctive wine labels and etched wineglasses were super cool in a biker-chic way. Even the wall hangings seemed cooler than in any other of the tasting rooms we visited.

We thought, okay, father and son are both making brilliant but completely distinctive wines—now we are onto something! But that was hardly the only surprise of the day.

Keen to meet and interview Cody, we asked Jacklyn, the hostess in the tasting room, how we could contact him. She kindly wrote down his phone number and email address and, handing the paper to us, said with a smile, "Oh, and you might also want to talk to Rollin Soles, at ROCO, just down the road."

Why was that? we wanted to know.

"Rollin is Cody's stepfather and he also makes amazing wine."

Okay. Now we were hooked, for real.

Cowboy Boots and Purple Hands

Though we had managed to taste the wines of both Ken and Cody Wright, and, later in the trip, of Cody's stepfather, Rollin Soles, we couldn't manage to get interviews with any of them on that first foray to Oregon. So, two months later, in May 2016, we found

The Latchkey Vineyard with Purple Hands' former tasting room in the background.



ourselves sitting on the porch at Purple Hands with Cody Wright, sipping his 2014 Latchkey Pinot Noir and getting to know a true artist of winemaking.

Cody is a rough-and-ready cowboy-hat-wearing character with, yes, somewhat purple hands from working in the fields. He was affable but also dead serious when discussing his philosophy and vision of winemaking. Like the sculptor who takes a block of marble and chips away at what shouldn't be there, Cody Wright looks at a vineyard and sees what he wants to pour into a bottle.

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His education started early and covered a great deal of territory. Cody was six years old when his parents, Ken and Corby Wright, moved from Carmel, California, to the Yamhill Valley, in Oregon. Previously a partner of Talbott Vineyards, in Salinas, Ken, like many ambitious and forward-thinking young winemakers in the 1980s, was eager to explore all that Oregon had to offer.

In 1986, Ken and Corby founded Panther Creek, which they sold in 1994 after they divorced. Corby would eventually marry Rollin Soles and start ROCO while Ken would create Ken Wright Cellars. So Cody was literally raised between two exceptional wineries. And it was always a labor of love for everyone involved. (Recently, after helping us with some photos for ROCO, Corby sent an email saying, "Great to hear you're meeting with Cody and KWC. It's a family affair of the heart. Or else

we're all just fools of the highest order, to be in this business.")

From the age of eleven, Cody was riding tractors and doing punch downs after school. He spent his childhood days wandering between vineyard rows and moving fermenters with forklifts, helping out between classes and during holidays. "I had a good head start because I grew up around the masters, so a lot of my understanding is through osmosis," says Cody. "Whenever I could, during summer vacations for example, I would be out in the vineyards full time. I learned by just standing in front of fermenters." Winemaking fascinated him and the feeling stayed with him. He graduated from the University of Oregon in 2003 with two science degrees: one in environmental science and the other in environmental geography. "So I was studying rocks and slopes and dirt," he explains. He worked in various vineyard managements and winemaking roles at Argyle, Ken Wright Cellars, and ROCO, and traveled to broaden his understanding. "I went to Australia and made wine for the famous Knappstein winery in the Clare Valley," he tells us. "Then I went to New Zealand and did a vintage at Ata Rangi in Martinborough." Everywhere he worked, he added to the wealth of knowledge instilled in him by his father and his stepfather.

After finishing school, he didn't know what was next. His father wanted him to stay in Oregon and work with him, so that's what Cody decided to do.

But he found himself conflicted. He'd learned a lot about winemaking from his



Gorgeous artwork on the label for Cody's very special and prestigious cuvée; only 100 bottles were produced.

family, his studies, and his travels and it had made him an independent thinker with a longing to experiment with his own ideas and ways of doing things. "Working with these people all over the world had opened my eyes and taught me new techniques and different styles. I wanted to put these methods into practice," he says. "My father, as you know, is a master winemaker and so is Rollin, and I wanted to combine all this knowledge I'd accumulated here and abroad to create my own thing. By that time I was pretty focused on what I wanted to achieve.

I was young but I had been fermenting grapes, making wine, and understanding the concepts behind the process since I was a teenager."

Though he was eager to make his own wines, initially he lacked the funding. "No one gave me money to start Purple Hands," he explains. "I told my father I wanted to make my own wines, try some new techniques, extractions, and experiments; just do my own thing. He said, 'You can use the winery when everyone is gone. You can buy your own barrels and your own grapes. I'll let you use the equipment,

but you clean all the stuff afterwards. I want the fermenters in better shape than when you found them.”

This was a place to start and Cody grabbed it. “All I could afford at the very, very beginning was some Oregon Merlot and maybe half a ton of Pinot Noir grapes,” he says. “So that is how Purple Hands really started, with just myself, in 2005, in Ken Wright Cellars.”

Yet he instinctively knew that if he followed his calling, it would take him where he wanted to go. “If you really strive for something and want to go in that direction, doors start opening,” says Cody—which pretty well describes his career as a winemaker.

Life Happens in the Vineyard

Though he is only 36 years old, Cody has been around vineyards and wineries far longer than most young winemakers. His approach to winemaking is a reflection of his stunning education combined with his youthful enthusiasm and love of experimentation, though he does



Cody Wright on the porch of his former tasting room.

confess that sometimes he goes too far. “It definitely took a long time to get to this point and I did go through trial and error,” he admits. “In 2010 I went on a no-oak-whatsoever bender with maceration. I was going to show everyone that you could gain enough power through whole cluster. But at the time, it turned out that without the development of oak, the wine wasn’t quite as powerful as I wanted to see years later.”

His absolute commitment to the soil is both profound and poetic. “I work diligently every year to make sure that the soil in the vineyard is expressed and captured in a way that gives the consumer a window into millions of years of earth’s evolution,” he explains. “This also combines with elevation, showing consumers how elevation shines through having more fruit-forward wines in lower elevations and more mineral-driven wines as the sources climb in elevation.”

Cody is obsessed with when to pick the grapes, down to the very minute. He loves to talk about “pick time,” that optimal moment to bring in the grapes from the fields, and why it’s so important. “For me, the pick date is one of the huge factors in determining how a bottle of wine is going to age. I spend so much time in the vineyard trying to find the new personality of the vines and grapes in every particular year,” he says. “Tasting, tasting, tasting. Analyzing and just trying to figure out when is the perfect moment for me to pick. You have to watch it very carefully. Life happens in the vineyard and you have to discover that vibrant balance of fruit to acidity. You



The tasting room is decorated with unique and fun objects.

can miss it, so I take this dead seriously. I also think it is the one defining characteristic that differentiates my wines from so many others made in the valley.”

He is acutely aware of the legacy, and his indebtedness to those who came before him in Oregon. “I am lucky to be making wine now that Oregon is famous for Pinot Noir,” he says. “I can focus on honing my skills because those guys—the old masters—laid the groundwork. They made no money. They did it because they were passionate about Pinot Noir, and now Oregon Pinot Noir is an institution.”

Expansion

Purple Hands started as a one-man operation in 2005 with 250 cases. Cody’s wife, Marque,

who grew up in southern Oregon amidst timber operations and cattle farms, joined Purple Hands after they married in 2012 and assists in managing the winery business. Not long after its inception, Purple Hands’ Holstein Pinot Noir was awarded 92 points by *Wine Spectator*, a rather spectacular feat for such a new winery. People began to take notice and eventually the winery found investment partners in wine buffs Scott and Michelle Campbell of Portland.

Though they are currently expanding, Purple Hands is still a small cult winery. “I’m really the only person making the wine, just me and Marque,” says Cody. “I have some really magical family in my life plus my friends who’ve all really supported me. I work closely with my vineyards. I try to make sure I express what’s in the vineyard. So now I’m just doing my own thing, using my own philosophy with the knowledge I’ve picked up over the years.”

His connection to the land on which he was raised has helped in many ways. “I found this site; a vineyard that was never on the market. There was some California interest in buying it but the woman who owned it did not want to sell to an outside conglomerate. She preferred selling it to a native Oregonian.” Cody and the Campbells were able to purchase the land in the Dundee Hills.

Today, Purple Hands produces some 5,000 cases a year from six different vineyards. Cody’s wines are all “single vineyard” and cost \$50 a bottle, which we think is a steal considering the small quantities being produced.

In 2016, Purple Hands opened a brand-new facility in downtown Dundee that will take the

winery to another level. Not that Cody Wright wants a huge expansion. “I could probably handle up to 7,000 cases at the new facility,” he says. “During harvest we get help from the tasting-room staff and some friends, but I think 5,500 is the magic number and I want to focus on quality.”

The Future

Though Cody is a Pinot Noir specialist, he is thinking about producing Chardonnay, and perhaps Nebbiolo, in the future. “My favorite red variety next to Pinot is Nebbiolo, a late-ripening grape I’d absolutely love to grow,” he says.

Whichever direction he decides to pursue, it is clear that his focus will remain laser sharp. “I don’t make wines for anyone else,” he says. “I’m just following my own path. I’m trying to

make wines that show more dimension. I think that more and more people working within the valley have become interested in my wines because they are different. It isn’t so much about creating wine as it is creating depth, precision, soul, and life, while showcasing the vineyard, the special clones we use, and the *terroir* we are given. I’m looking for focus and clarity, purity and honesty. I’ve become entranced with sharing my idealism and philosophy with people about winemaking and what I embody within the wines I make.”

We’re absolutely certain that Cody Wright will succeed and that in the future we’ll be hearing much more about Purple Hands. Today, his wines compete with the best that Oregon has to offer. Tomorrow, Purple Hands could surpass them all. Certainly, as a second-generation Oregonian winemaker, Cody is the future of the industry: purposeful, creative, and serious, with a huge dollop of coolness. He sits in the middle of a very important Oregon wine legacy and he is the perfect candidate to carry on the traditions and maintain the high standards of those pioneers who came before him.

Oh, and one other reason we love Cody Wright: as we concluded our visit he offered us an entire case of his wines. No, actually, he didn’t offer, he insisted and then went to grab the wine himself. The gesture cemented our appreciation for the guy, and being able to enjoy his amazing wines over the course of the next few weeks only increased our appreciation for his true artistry.

The kid is not only a brilliant winemaker; he understands a thing or two about promotion.



Purple Hands' 2014 Pinot Noirs.

NICK'S TASTING NOTES

2014 Stoller Vineyard Designate Pinot Noir

This is the most accessible of the single vineyards, yet it is no less intense. Showing a full body and decent tannins, this wine has medium-high acidity matched to a mélange of fresh, juicy red and black forest fruits, as well as floral and mineral notes, all wrapped up in a lovely silky texture. Drinking well now, its bottle age has mellowed the wine and its components are coming together, so drink it over the next 4 to 6 years. Grown on Bellpine soils, this is a very good, very enjoyable wine. Only 600 cases were made of this vintage, which earned 93 points from *Wine Spectator*.

2014 Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir

This wine displays a bright crimson color, violet hints, and a youthful watery rim. Sappy and inviting, the glass opens with bright red cherry, raspberry, floral, and spice notes. With more airtime, complex savory notes start to emerge, notes of meat pies, black cherries, and forest floor, which give this wine quite a complex edge. After a while, black tealike scents and notes of India ink start to intermingle with ripe black cherries to create a complex earthy nose. With a sturdy and compact feel, this wine is another great example of Cody showcasing the vineyard and containing or reigning in the hot vintage conditions. Drink between 4 and 12 years after release. A mere 200 cases were made of this vintage, which earned 91 points from *Wine Spectator*.

2014 Holstein Vineyard Designate Pinot Noir

This is my personal favorite of the all the “single vineyard” offerings released by Purple Hands. The Pinot grapes for this wine were sourced from a high-altitude vineyard. Vivid crimson in color, this wine bursts out of the gate, announcing its presence with powerful pure bright

traditional Beaune-like scents of bright, crunchy red fruits, raspberries, *framboises*, spices, floral notes, red cherries, and barely discernable vanilla oak. Fresh and pure in the mouth, expansive, with a torrent of small red fruits that coat and fill the palate with a textured sweet elixir of red liqueurlike mineral fruit, light spices, and deep-veined black cherries, this wine has a more overtly mouthwatering fruity profile than the other cuvées. Juicy with tangy high acidity, the wine finishes with a lingering light touch of blueberries. Nicely textured, mouth-filling, and youthful with tight, dense, powerful tannins. This wine has a lot in reserve, and earned itself 93 points from *Wine Spectator*.

Drink between 5 and 15 years from release.

2014 Freedom Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir

Expresses a more pure red fruit style than the Stoller, which I personally find more refreshing; vibrant and drinkable when working in conjunction with wines with such inerrant levels of high acidity rather than those of the richer, more Cote du Nuits style that are sometimes sought after in Oregon. The Freedom Hill works well in this respect; the vineyard sits higher than the Stoller, at 300 to 500 feet, and has produced a wine with a more hightoned, crisp, and red-fruit feel. It's silky, luscious, and streamlined in the mouth while still being generous and richly fruited. The acidity melds perfectly with the fruit, and with still-buried ironlike yet sweet tannins, it has a good future. Perfect in 6 to 12 years.

2014 Latchkey Vineyard Designate Pinot Noir

Bought in conjunction with his father, Ken Wright, this could be the jewel in Cody's vineyard crown. A serious example of an Oregon Pinot Noir, this wine shows a noticeably darker purple color than the other cuvées. It has a youthful bloody crimson rim and is much less opaque, with violet glints; the nose is extremely deep and almost smoky even though the wine is only slightly oaked. The wine is expressive, throaty,

and spicy; black plums and cherries swirl with the more exotic scents of Brazil nuts, minerals, licorice, red fruits, blueberries, weeds, candy floss, and a touch of cream. The palate is super rich for a Pinot, smooth and textured with a wonderful duality between power and lightness. This wine is long in the mouth with buoying high acidity, dense small tannins, and a wonderful core of fruit—all of which ensure future bottle age. Drink between 5 and 20 years from release. There were 420 cases produced from this vintage, which received 91 points from *Wine Spectator*.

PURPLE HANDS WINERY

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Tasting room: open 5 days a week, Thursday to Monday, from 11am to 4:30pm