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Seeking a Washington wine niche

By T.J. BURNHAM

WE don't want to be Italy, France, California; we want to be Washington."

This terse goal for Washington winemakers from Pasco vineyardist Jeff Gordon speaks of the essence of carving a wine identity from a global industry gushing with vintage players.

Yet, Washington wants a bigger part, said the Gordon Brothers Family Vineyards patriarch.

"We need to identify what makes us unique," he said at a Washington State University workshop called "Marketing Wines to the World" in Pullman.

"We can produce premium wines," Gordon emphasized.

Washington's 35,000-acre winegrape industry is the second-largest wine producer in the United States, but it is far back from California's commanding lead. Washington owes its growth to a reputation for good wines, Gordon said.

That's important to an industry where 400 wineries and 250 grape growers depend on Washington's wine market for survival. It's also important to

Key Points

- Washington is the nation's second-largest wine producer.
- Industry growth increases pressure for new markets.
- Rattlesnake Hills wine district was sanctioned this year.

the state financially, given the \$3 billion impact the industry is said to have on Washington's economy, according to the Washington Wine Commission.

And, it is important to workers — 14,000 are full-time — in wine-related jobs that together pay more than \$455 million a year, the commission estimates.

Young wine state

Yet, Washington remains a new kid in wine, tripling its 11,000 acres from 13 years ago and increasing its wineries from 19 in 1981 to more than 350 today in an 18 million-gallon business.

Boasting no fewer than nine official wine areas identified by the U.S. Treasury Department, Washington's newest appellation, Rattlesnake Hills, surfaced this year in the south-central area of the state.

While all this signals a



JEFF AND VICKI Gordon's Pasco vineyards above the Snake River represent a growing number of producers in Washington's burgeoning wine industry.

healthy growth, it also means more markets are needed, warned Gordon. "We know a farmer will produce until he kills a market," he said of Washington's earlier riesling planting binge.

Gordon was struck by an unusual agricultural phenomenon when the former onion, grain and potato grower began to market his initial vintage in 1983. "They asked me how much I wanted for my wine," he recalled. "After farming my whole life, this was the first time someone asked me how much I wanted for my product!"

Now a 25,000-case business, Gordon Brothers considers distributors to be the gatekeepers, who can make or break wine success.

"But there is no economic marketing model that can possibly define the economic impact of a distributor to a winery," he said.

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Rattlesnake Hills is newest Washington wine district

RISING atop the northern edge of the Yakima River Valley in south-central Washington, Rattlesnake Hills is the state's newest federally recognized American Viticultural Area.

Covering more than 68,000 acres, the region boasts no fewer than 17 wineries, 29 vineyards and 1,500 bearing winegrape production acres. The U.S. Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau recognized the state's ninth appellation this year.

"Rattlesnake Hills has built a reputation as a quality grape-growing region and winery tourism destination in our state," says Robin Pollard, Washington Wine Commission executive director. "Federal recognition of Rattlesnake Hills as an official AVA will help market wines from this unique viticultural area and showcase the diversity of our state's grape-growing regions to the rest of the world."

Located four miles east of Yakima, and encompassing an expanse of hills running east to west along the northern point of the Yakima Valley and south of Moxee Valley, the Rattlesnake Hills AVA lies within both the established Columbia Valley and Yakima Valley appellations. Beginning at an elevation of 850 feet and rising to more than 3,000, the region sits higher than the surrounding areas.

A growing number of wineries throughout Washington source their grapes from Rattlesnake Hills, says Pollard. Key varieties in the new appellation are cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah, riesling, chardonnay and malbec.