

BETHEL HEIGHTS: THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Bruce Schoenfeld tells the inspiring story of the Casteel family, who, at a critical crossroads in Oregon's development as a wine region, have bravely struck out on a radical route whose successful end will be survival on their own principled terms

Let's go to the sheep," Mimi Casteel says. She leads me from the Bethel Heights tasting room, down a path, to a wooden shed. Inside are six Babydoll Southdown adults that she purchased from a California breeder last year and four newborns. They look at me with uncurious, stuffed-animal eyes.

This isn't agritourism; it's radical viticulture. A second-generation grape grower with a master's degree, Casteel, 38, has studied ancient grazing communities. She spent years at the US Forest Service, tramping through wildlands, compiling a botanical database. Her nighttime reading ranges from *Symmetry and Chaos* and the *Journal of Applied Ecology*, to *The Art and Science of Shepherding*. She has strong, original ideas on the proper way to manage a vineyard. "I don't like to break up the soil," she says. "I don't like tillage. I don't like cultivation."

Casteel, who has gradually inherited control of her family's Willamette Valley winery with her cousin Ben over the past decade, believes that crops are directly influenced by their interaction with anything that lives around them or passes near. That means fertilizers and the prevailing winds, but also microscopic bacteria and the hooves of grazing animals. The influences may be minute, too small to chart, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. Together they comprise an ecosystem, one that we damage irreparably when we isolate grapevines away from their habitat. "One of the things I feel I've learned," she says, "is that removing animals, simplifying agriculture because the size of the farms has made it untenable to be diversified, has caused a lot of our problems."

Her goal is to facilitate the subtle interactions with the landscape, not thwart them as conventional techniques seem meant to do. If this sounds like mystical thinking—biodynamics without the user's manual—understand that the title on Casteel's business card is "Provocateur."

Recently she has directed her attention to the final stages of grape growing; those last days and hours before fruit is picked. "It's about being able to push through berry maturation that has nothing to do with sugar," she says. "It's that window when you've plateaued in terms of your sugar accumulation and you're basically sitting there, and all of that magic is happening inside the berry. Grapes don't do it by themselves. They need help. You can go dig a hole and look for earthworms. But what actually does the bulk of the work are these tiny little things you can't see."

The sheep? Their role, as they rummage around, is to stimulate the microbial activity around the vine roots. With the proper vibrations, a mucus is emitted that helps unlock minerals in the soil. There's more: When animals nibble, Casteel claims, it stimulates the delivery of nutrients to the plants. "You can't do it with shears," she says. "It probably has to do with the bacteria in their mouths, the way their teeth cut. You get twice as dense a phytonutrient load as when you don't have them." It's the difference between taking a vitamin C pill and eating a grapefruit.

Starting this growing season, Casteel began letting the sheep graze in a controlled fashion—a quarter-acre at a time—over her vineyards. This has also meant less mowing, fortuitously enough, so fewer of those ground-churning passes over the land that she abhors. "Everything that's amorphous about wine, that's what this is about," she says. She looks out over the vineyard with proprietary eyes. Making wines that could only come from this specific piece of Oregon hillside—land that she knows and understands as fully as only someone who spent a childhood there could—isn't a matter of artistic choice. It means nothing less than her winery's survival.

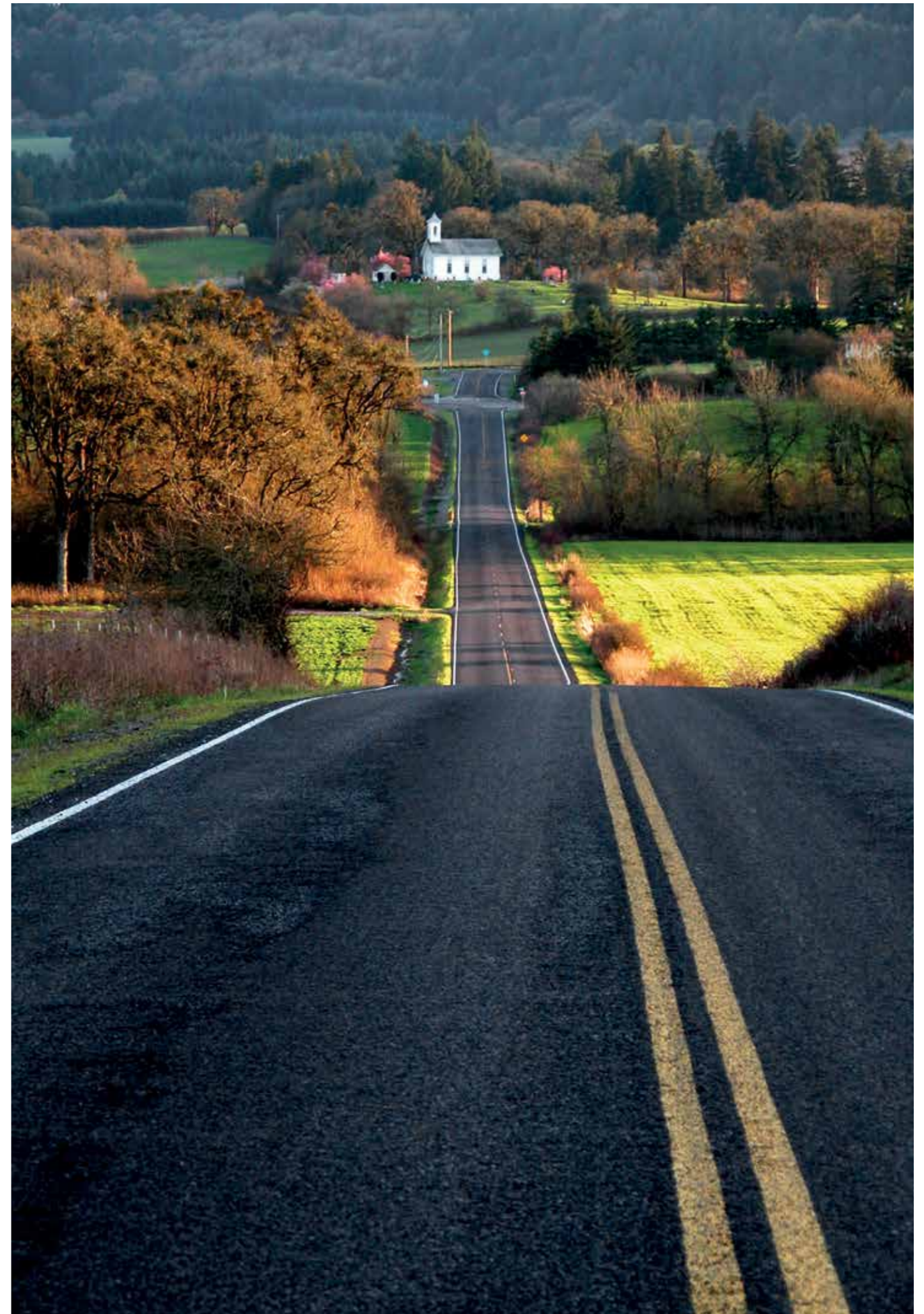
A family-oriented utopia

There are multiple generations of Casteels in the Bethel Heights story. The most consequential at the moment is the newest. Mimi and her husband Nick have two children. Ben, 37, and his wife Mindy have one. It's for them, and the sons and daughters who will follow, that decisions about the winery are being made. "We're talking about centuries that we're planning to be in this," Pat Dudley, Mimi's mother, explains. "Then we'll have something that speaks about this place. Family that has lived here for multiple generations. Family that knows every row of vines like it knows its own children."

Dudley and Ted Casteel, her husband, founded Bethel Heights in 1984 with Terry Casteel, Ted's twin brother, and Terry's wife Marilyn. Ted grew the grapes. Terry made the wine. Pat and Marilyn made the business happen. Like so many of the early Oregon vintners, they'd come seeking a pleasant life. Ted and Pat were assistant history professors at the University of Michigan in the late 1970s. Terry had a psychology practice in Seattle, where Marilyn worked as an administrator at the University of Washington. Among the four of them, they had 11 graduate degrees, mostly from highfalutin places like Stanford and Princeton.

Ted and Pat had discovered wine, and each other, while studying in France. (They were married to different people at the time, but never mind that.) Terry and Marilyn came to it through friends at the University of Washington, including

Right: Bethel Heights, the hill being among the first to receive the Pacific winds that help keep nights cooler here than in AVAs farther north in Willamette Valley.



All photography courtesy of Bethel Heights

David Lake, who were helping establish a nascent industry in the state. “He stopped reading *Psychology Today*,” Marilyn says of Terry, “and couldn’t stop reading about wine.” On the day after Mimi was born in 1976, her great-grandfather died. Pat ended up inheriting \$100,000. That started both couples talking about buying a vineyard and reimagining their lives.

They concocted a utopian plan, just practical enough to work. It involved enough open ground to accommodate two households on opposite sides of a pond, a quarter-mile (400m) apart. “Our expectations, the reasons we did this, weren’t about the Pinot Noir,” Ted says. “They had to do with lifestyle and family and living where you work. This was what we wanted to do with our lives. Raise our kids together. Be outside a lot.”

They planned for 5,000–6,000 cases a year. “We had it all metered in,” Ted adds. “We figured we had to plant x number of acres and make x number of bottles in order to make this a business that would support two families. We weren’t after getting rich or famous. We certainly weren’t in the fine-wine business. Our Pinot Noir sold for ten bucks a bottle.”

Nobody makes wine in Oregon to get rich or famous. The Willamette Valley is apportioned not in vast tracts, as California is, but in small, irregularly shaped plots. That has kept the profile of the region’s wineries low outside the Pacific Northwest. There just isn’t much wine from any of them. “The reality is, the economics of making wine in Oregon are not great,” says Luisa Ponzi, whose father, Dick, relocated from Northern California to the Willamette in 1969 to start Ponzi Vineyards. “Our climate and our soils are not hospitable to high yields. So we can’t push it, or we’d drop the quality. And we can’t ask exorbitant amounts for our wines. If you come out and say, ‘This is 100 bucks,’ people say, ‘A hundred bucks? I don’t even know what Oregon wine is.’”

Those restrictions tend to attract a type of individual more interested in the quality of his days and nights than in the brand of the car he drives. “The roots of our state are like that,” says Alex Blosser, the second-generation proprietor of his family’s Sokol Blosser winery. When the pioneer wagon trains reached Boise, Idaho, in the 1850s and 1860s, passengers had a choice. “You had a huge gold rush in California and a huge gold rush in Alaska,” Blosser explains. “Those who wanted to strike it rich went south or north. Those who wanted to homestead their little piece of land continued on to Oregon. The DNA of the people here is, ‘I came here not to strike it rich but because this is the lifestyle I want.’ Those people have attracted like-minded people.”

To ensure that the lifestyle they were drawn to would be passed on intact, the first-generation Oregon vintners helped pass laws that limited what wineries could do. The explosion of tourism in Napa Valley seemed a cautionary tale. Restaurants, hotels, major function spaces—anything more about attracting people to the area than about agriculture was restricted. Even today, if you drive off one of the main highways, you’ll inevitably end up on a dusty dirt road. Until recently, not a single hotel that might, in any sense, be called luxurious existed in the area.

And while wine grapes finally became the most valuable of the valley’s crops last year, they remain just one of more than 200—everything from cereal grain, to cabbage, and rutabagas to watermelons. “This is one of the last great pieces of farmland in the world,” Pat says now. “It’s very endangered from human expansion. The great sites in the Willamette Valley for grapes probably haven’t even been discovered. I mean, we are infants

There was only one way for Bethel Heights to survive in any recognizable form. They refused to get bigger. Instead, Ben and Mimi agreed, they’d need to get smaller

here. You start layering on restaurants, resorts, paved roads, sewers, fire departments, and you will have paved over anything that’s worth anything here.”

Such thinking might come straight from Mimi’s reading: Columella or Varro’s *Res Rusticae*. The problem was, many of these founding families were as fecund as the landscape. Pat and Ted had two children. So did Marilyn and Terry. Grandchildren started arriving. Those \$10 bottles of Pinot Noir are \$30 now, maybe even \$50 or \$60 for a special one, but that has barely kept pace with inflation, let alone allowed for health insurance and retirement programs. The business plan that functioned so well for two idealistic couples starts to creak and clatter when applied to an extended family. “The next generation changes everything,” says Ponzi, who has been working with her father since 1993. “Instead of one family, you’ve got three or four to support. And you have to accommodate the families if you want to keep it a family business.”

What to do? That was the question facing both sets of parents in 2005, after Mimi and Ben decided, in quite different circumstances, to come home. Terry had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, and the symptoms were beginning to assert themselves. He needed a successor. Ben, who’d studied in Burgundy and was working as a winemaker elsewhere in the valley, was the natural choice. Mimi had read history and classical languages at Tulane then set off on a completely unrelated career with the Forest Service. She’d been living a transient lifestyle throughout the West Coast but had a husband from Oregon. She wanted to settle down and raise a family. Could a 10,000-case winery sustain them all?

Pat and Ted and Marilyn and Terry put their heads together and decided that it couldn’t. Bethel Heights would need to get even bigger. That’s what was happening around the valley, at Ponzi and Sokol Blosser and Adelsheim and Elk Cove and the others, as the first generation passed the baton to the second. “My parents were doing 10,000 cases,” Luisa Ponzi says of their transition. “We’re doing 50,000 cases. That works for where we are now, but who knows? The facility we have can accommodate 100,000.”

The Ponzis and Adelsheims and Sokols and Casteels had created the wine industry in Oregon out of nothing, just a rolling landscape that happened to be at the latitude of Burgundy and a vague notion that Pinot Noir might work. Now it was up to their sons and daughters to grow that industry. “Do a huge expansion, bring in outside money, make 20,000 or even 40,000 cases of wine,” Dudley says. “You buy fruit. That’s what everybody else does, right? We were all about, ‘It’s time to expand.’”

Ben and Mimi studied the plan. They took stock of what was happening in the Willamette and also in places such as the Sonoma Coast and the Santa Rita Hills, which were emerging



as sources of top-quality American Pinot Noir. They sat down together and discovered they were of like mind. There was only one way for the Bethel Heights they’d come home for to survive in any recognizable form.

They refused to get bigger. Instead, they agreed, they’d need to get smaller.

Big-name buyers

In 2002, the California Public Employees Retirement System—known as CALPERS—began acquiring land around Willamette Valley. Some lots were vineyards, others vacant land that quickly became vineyards. The total exceeded more than 1,000 acres (400ha). From a standing start, CALPERS became the Willamette’s largest landowner.

Its plan was to sell grapes to existing wineries while subdividing some holdings into turnkey properties for vanity producers, putting a home and vines on every parcel. The latter part never happened. The grand recession of 2008 stopped construction and sent land values tumbling.

Once the economy recovered, a skittish CALPERS found a willing buyer in Jackson Family Wines, the California conglomerate that now owns 28 brands in California alone, including Arrowood, Freemark Abbey, La Crema, and the flagship Kendall-Jackson. In 2013, Jackson Family bought four Oregon properties from CALPERS. After decades without a major producer in its midst, the Willamette Valley’s close-knit, collegial wine industry woke one day to find the owners of more than 35,000 acres (14,000ha) of vineyard land on four continents as a dominant presence.

Above: The first two Casteel generations at Bethel Heights—(from left) Jessie, Mimi, Pat, Marilyn, Terry, and Ben—the family moving there for lifestyle reasons in the 1970s.

Jackson Family insists that it plans to make wines from each property, not combine grapes or bottlings into some Willamette Valley superbrand. Yet its arrival brought with it the realization that the acclaim Oregon Pinot Noir has received in recent years will attract outside investment.

Much of that is likely to be at a scale that the valley hasn’t previously experienced. “It’s not a coincidence that [Jackson Family] arrived here right at the time that the region was about to take a new step in terms of the international spotlight,” says Eugenia Keegan, a 15-year veteran of the local wine scene and the general manager and winemaker at Gran Moraine, one of the new Jackson Family properties in Oregon. “Only larger companies could buy those beautiful properties and have the ability to maintain them and make wine from them.”

The area’s pioneer winemaking families, who came for the lifestyle and only gradually gained an affinity for making wine, still seem unprepared for such a shift. “They’re fearful,” Keegan allows. “The new generation bought into the lives that their parents created on their farms. This looks very different for them.”

One of the Jackson Family vineyards, Zena Crown, abuts Bethel Heights. Mimi and Ben look out at it every day. It serves as a tangible reminder (not that they’d ever need one) that Bethel Heights can’t compete with Jackson Family or any other high-volume producer in quantity or price. But what it can do, uniquely, is make the wines of Bethel Heights.

It turns out that the Casteel brothers stumbled on a singular site when they chose that particular hillside at the east end of the Van Duzer Corridor, northwest of the state capital of Salem. Most of Oregon’s best-known producers are situated in the northern part of the Willamette, closest to Portland. That makes sense. When the industry was beginning in the 1970s and ‘80s,



THE WINES

2013 Bethel Heights Pinot Blanc

An enticing manifestation of an underrated variety. Crisp and measured but filled with fruit, despite a soggy harvest. | 16

2013 Bethel Heights Riesling

An edgy, sharp Riesling that's tangy in an appealing way. Think lime squash. | 15

2013 Bethel Heights Casteel Chardonnay

Just full enough to reveal New World origins, this wine is defined by its energy. It races through the mouth, focused and sleek. | 16.5

2011 Bethel Heights Justice Pinot Noir

From the coolest vintage on record, this cuvée comes from middle-aged vines in the southwest of the property. It's brooding, tightly wound, dense, and undeniably serious. Let's revisit in five years. | 17

2012 Bethel Heights Estate Pinot Noir

Quite a bit happening here. The nose shows raspberry and cherry, but also coffee and the forest floor. More structure than might be expected; it seems primed to coalesce in the coming months. | 16.5

2012 Bethel Heights Aeolian Pinot Noir

A new bottling designed to showcase the most wind-affected parts of the property. A chunkier wine than the Estate, less subtle, but with a black-cherry richness that one could misconstrue as Californian. | 16.5

2012 Bethel Heights Southeast Block Pinot Noir

Opaque, fruit-driven, round, rather obvious at this stage. Not as successful as the other Pinot Noirs in this hot vintage. | 15.5

2012 Bethel Heights Flat Block Pinot Noir

A terrific wine. Taut, focused, and perfectly proportioned, it impresses with its drive and energy. The wine to serve someone who isn't convinced that Oregon Pinot Noir can be great. | 18.5



proximity to the area's largest market was important. In an uncertain climate, so was ripeness. The pockets of potential vineyard land around the towns of Dundee, McMinnville, and Newberg offered more consistent warmth than the windswept farmlands to the south.

These days, summers are warmer, and the zone that is now called the Eola/Amity Hills AVA, a half-hour drive south of McMinnville, is in vogue. Some of the state's best-known producers—among them Ken Wright, Erath, Evening Land, Bergstrom, Adelsheim, and Elk Cove—source grapes from vineyards there. Bethel Heights' estate vineyard—its Flat Block and Southeast Block, especially—is regarded as highly as any. "Ben and I came back intentionally because of what we think this place is capable of," Mimi says, "because of what we believe these vines in our care are capable of."

Fifty-two miles (84km) to the west, the Pacific Ocean ebbs and churns, sending evening winds unimpeded across Polk County. Hills like the one called Bethel Heights are the first bump in the land that they meet. "We get every bit as warm during the days," Ben says. "But we can have that 30–35 degree [Fahrenheit (17–20° C)] diurnal shift with the cool air coming in." The most evident result is lower sugar accumulation than in the AVAs to the north, especially during warm vintages. That translates to more modest alcohol. And strong wind also thickens skins. For a thin-skinned variety such as Pinot Noir, that can have a pronounced architectural effect on the wine. With good weather, Mimi notes, Bethel Heights is capable of that transcendent combination of power and restraint.

The vines help. They're old. They're infested by phylloxera. They barely produce enough crop to be viable. It's probable that Jackson Family, and just about anyone else, would have pulled them out by now. That's what Ted Casteel was ready to do in 2005. But with Ben and Mimi returning to the winery, he figured he'd let them decide the clonal and varietal choices that would be charting the course of their future.

What the cousins decided was not to replant at all until they absolutely had to. "We tasted through the cellar and we both felt, hands down, this is the best thing we have going for us," Mimi says. "With an old, own-rooted plant, that translation of what's happening in the soil to what's happening in your glass is completely different than with a head that's talking through a pair of feet that doesn't belong to it." As long as the old vines are producing the winery's best grapes, Mimi says, she'd be a fool to pull them out. "When your grandpa comes home and says, 'I've got cancer,'" she says, "you don't shoot him in the face."

She doesn't drop much fruit from those old vines, which isn't surprising. She also doesn't drop much from the newer plantings around the vineyard, which is. To Mimi, a green-harvest is as invasive and contrived as over-irrigating. How can you trick a plant into altering its reproductive process, then claim with a straight face that the wine you produce is a snapshot of the place and the vintage?

As she makes her case, she synthesizes the Greeks, the ecologists, and even chaos theory. She filters it through nights spent sipping wines that "make me panic," which in her argot is the highest complement of all. She knows that a mathematical equation leading from the land to those wines isn't possible, but

Top left: The sheep whose rummaging stimulates microbial activity at the vines' roots. Below: Inspecting the grapes at harvest, pruning the vines, and walking the vineyards.



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a philosophical one might be. "The more you are at war with your crop, the more it's going to be obvious in the wine you produce." She shrugs. "If you don't understand that as a grape grower, what's amazing is just not going to be possible for you."

Success by another measure

What's amazing also isn't possible from a winery pushing 20,000 cases—at least not from the land that Mimi and Ben have inherited. And the prospect of making cuvées from purchased grapes, which her family has done for years, doesn't interest them. So, inevitably, bottles of Bethel Heights wine will become harder to find. From a peak of about 17,000 cases, they're headed toward 8,000. They'll charge \$30–40 a bottle, more for the special bottlings, and augment that by selling some of their well-regarded fruit around the valley.

Mimi is aware that those phylloxera-riddled vines won't last forever. She also knows that making Bethel Heights wine from young vines alone would be disastrous. To mitigate that, she has planted 23 acres (9ha) at a site called Ingram Lane, 8 miles (13km) away. By the time the old vines peter out, she hopes, the new ones will be fully mature. She points to them on a hillside as we drive past, a pretty-as-a-picture landscape with a small house beside. That's also where she, Nick, and their two children live. In a sense, she has replicated what her parents did three decades before by building a home, planting, and creating a farmstead. The only difference is, they've already built her a brand. "They've done the hard work for us," she says.

Not that success from this point will be easy. Around the valley, the Casteel plan is seen as quite a gamble. At Sokol Blosser, an 80,000-case négociant brand called Evolution—made from grapes grown as far away as Santa Barbara—subsidizes the premium wines. Ponzi has broadened its following with an off-site tasting room and restaurant on the Willamette Valley's main thoroughfare. Erath sold out to Ste Michelle Estates. "It's going to be a hard road for the Casteels," Luisa Ponzi says. "They've got older couples to support. They've got younger couples to support. I think they like the idea of 'let's just do it as a family.' But where we are as an industry, I don't see that working economically. They'll have to grow, or diversify, do something. There's too much competition now. You might survive. I don't think you can thrive."

But what if thriving isn't the goal? What if, in the European model, remaining solvent until the next generation is the only expectation that Ben and Mimi have? "When bankers talk about the health of our industry, they talk about profitability," Pat says, "as if that's the only measure. But if the family is sustaining itself, its property, its land, its estate, its neighborhood, its environment, that's success, too. It's success by another measure."

In today's return-driven world, perhaps that's Bethel Heights' most radical idea of all. Consider it part of the terroir of the place. Because, as much as anything climatological, it will influence the wines going forward.

"If we had shareholders and profit-takers, we couldn't do any of this," Pat says. "You can't justify it economically. But if you want to talk about just staying here and continuing to exist and not worrying about justifying it, we're fine. We can keep the old vines and bring in the sheep and try to figure out a way to do our vineyard without machines, because we're trying to survive, not to be profitable. And that's all that Ben and Mimi want to do." ■