

Reserve Pinot Noir Club™
Focus on Shea Wine Cellars
Homer 03 \$65 — Block 23 03 \$48

When Dick Shea and his original partners purchased the land that was to become Shea Vineyards, along Highway 240 that skirts the north Chehalem hills, the area was viticulturally unproven. In 1989, when the first Pinot noir plants went into the ground, the sedimentary soils then known as the WillaKenzie series (named after two of Oregon's largest rivers, the Willamette and the Mackenzie) were not considered as desirable as the better-known Jory soils that comprised the so-called Red Hills of Dundee.

In the first few years of production, yields were high by today's standards, and fruit quality was still developing. Even by 1993 some of the customers for Shea fruit were becoming restive because of the seeming slow evolution of the site's expression.



But in 1994 Dick Shea, now sole owner, and vineyard manager Javier Marin, made a new commitment to quality—and a different way of managing the vineyard. Crop levels were reduced, vineyard practices tightened, and a new philosophy was begun of doing whatever each winemaking customer required in order to obtain the best fruit.

Results were quickly seen in fruit quality, and from that point forward the reputation of Shea Vineyard has been on the rise.

Site and Soils

Shea Vineyards runs along a southern slope of hillside in the north Chehalem hills. The vineyard is naturally divided into two hill sections by a deep ravine. In ancient geologic times an inland sea covered the area up to about 400-ft, and the soils, though somewhat variable throughout the site, are all sedimentary in nature and are layered over fractured sandstone.

The western hill, now known as "Left Field" (in keeping with the baseball analogy to "Shea Stadium" and the "Homer" wine made by Dick's allied Shea Wine Cellars) is smaller (50 total planted acres) than the eastern hill (90 planted acres), and runs from approximately 400-ft. to 600-ft. in elevation. The WillaKenzie-series soils are somewhat more uniform than the eastern hill.

The east hill runs from about 300-ft. to 620-ft at the crest. The sedimentary soils in this hill contain somewhat more clay, and are therefore now classified as Melbourne soils (a newly-defined subset of WillaKenzie).

In general, there is no particular difference in overall fruit quality between the hills—though as a sampling of any Shea Vineyard wines will reveal, there is great variety between blocks within the vineyard. Today, winemakers seem less desirous of one hill over the other, rather looking at the individual blocks as separate entities. For owner Dick Shea, this makes sense.

"There is nothing superior about the one soil over the other," says Shea. He points out that of the two highest rated Shea wines by Robert M. Parker Jr. (both achieving scores of 94), one was from fruit grown on WillaKenzie soil from the west hill and the other Melbourne soil from the east hill.

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NW Big Reds Club™

K Vintners Magnificent Wine Co Syrah 03 \$25
Basel Cellars Merriment 02 \$56

Trey Busch, like many young winemakers, was lured to the Walla Walla Valley to help pioneer the wine industry's growing reputation for luscious Merlot, powerful Cabernet Sauvignon and silky Syrah.

But Basel Cellars is not an ordinary winery, and the wines produced are far from average. For starters, the \$14 million estate features a 13,000 square-foot luxury overnight lodge perched on a hill overlooking the Walla Walla River and valley floor.

Combine a well-stocked pond, complete with fly fishing lessons and landscaped grounds overlooking golden wheat fields nestled next to the foothills of the Blue Mountains, and you know you have something special going on.

And, the crème de la crème is the wine, bottled under two labels, Basel Cellars and the second label Vierra, Basel Cellars has won a reputation for producing an exciting and elegant Bordeaux blend called Merriment, and small productions of some of the best Syrah in the region. Vierra, the second label, captures some of the essence of Basel wines at value prices with a Claret, Syrah and a small amount of Cabernet Franc.

A native of Atlanta, GA, Busch realizes just how lucky he was to land the top winemaking spot at Basel Cellars, which opened officially in 2003. After college and a two-year stint in the Navy, Busch moved to Seattle and began a career working as a buyer for Nordstrom's.

But life at one of Seattle's premiere department stores took a toll on the 34-year-old who spent part of his life living out of a suitcase and motel rooms, and long work weeks away from his wife Jennifer.

"I just didn't want to do this anymore," Busch admits. "By the time we had our daughter Kailey, I knew I wanted a life closer to home. I wanted a different challenge."

While visiting friends in the Walla Walla area, Busch was introduced to Eric Dunham, winemaker for Dunham Cellars, who offered Busch a way out of the retail rat race and into the grape business.

"Eric needed an assistant winemaker, especially one who understood production and sales," Busch said. "Obviously, I didn't know squat about wine at the time, other than I liked what was being produced in Walla Walla. But we looked around and realized it was the perfect place to raise our daughter, and the job was intriguing enough to take the plunge."

For three years, Busch worked for Dunham, learning the ropes of the wine business, taking courses in winemaking and production and participating in

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Shea Wine Cellars

PN Homer 03 \$65

PN Block 23 03 \$48

Northwest Big Reds Club™

K Vintners Magnificent Wine Co Syrah 03 \$25

Basel Cellars Merriment 02 \$60

New Discoveries Club™

Iris Hill Pinot gris 02 \$15

Iris Hill Pinot noir 02 \$20

Lumos Pinot gris 02 \$17

Dessert Wine Club™

Jackson Triggs Riesling Ice Wine 375 ml \$58

Big Reds Club continued from page 1**Basel Cellars, Continued**

weekly tasting sessions with a group of winemakers from the area. He read everything he could get his hands on, holding Kailey in one arm while reading a technical manual with his free arm. He spent countless hours in the vineyards.

"It was an intense learning period and I learned a lot from Eric Dunham," Busch said.

As his passion for wine and technical experience grew, Trey Busch began nurturing a plan to someday make his own wine. As another winemaker recently commented, "you can't be around Walla Walla for long and not pick up the enthusiasm that abounds for winemaking—it is like an infectious laugh and once started, everybody is at least giggling."

Greg Basel, a grape grower in Walla Walla, (Pheasant Run Vineyard) and his partner Steve Hanson wanted to build a winery in the area. When the estate of a former wireless communications executive came up for auction, the two partners quickly realized they could turn the mansion and grounds into a winery and a destination site for guests who purchase a membership to Basel Cellars. The membership allows the mansion to be rented for up to 18 guests in a rustic but elegantly-furnished home.

Memberships started out slow, but according to Lynn Anderson, Basel Cellars marketing and sales guru, "weekends are totally booked for the year."

With the new location, which happened to already have grapes planted, the two business partners needed a winemaker. And, through word-of-mouth, Trey Busch became one of the luckiest and newest winemakers in Walla Walla.

"I knew I was lucky and better yet, Greg and Steve wanted to make the best wine they could from the best fruit available," Busch said. "That was the top goal—to get the best out of the vineyards."

The Wines

Because Walla Walla can remain very hot during the summer months, Busch said he has to deal with elevated pH levels, either by acidifying the wine or blending with fruit from other areas such as the Columbia Valley. Busch then separates the free-run juice from the press juice. All the press juice is destined for Vierra wines while the free running juice is stored in new oak and eventually is part of the blend for Basel wines.

The Basel wines, says Busch, are crafted for longevity. They are intense now, although drinkable, but will age with grace and power. The 2002 Merriment is a blend of 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 40 percent Merlot and 10 percent Cabernet Franc. This is a gorgeous wine filled with plum, dark cherries and herbs in the mouth. The tannins are smooth and approachable. The 2002 Merriment shows the full impact of experience, access to premium grapes, and the well equipped winery at Basel Cellars. The 2002 Merriment is Trey's best wine to date, and one of the outstanding reds from Walla Walla's 2002 vintage.

**Basel Cellars
Merriment 02 \$58**

Sweet black cherries, mint, cassis, & orange tea on the nose...burst of cherries & plums are balanced by the bright acidity & sweet silky tannins that carry through to the finish...only 335 cases produced.

This gorgeous Bordeaux-style blend is deep red in color, and has a plush texture like crushed velvet. The nose is reminiscent of tobacco leaf and sweet cherry syrup. The flavors are dominated by plums, dark cherries, herbs, and spice. The tannins are smooth and supple. This wine is sure to age beautifully, revealing its complexity over the next 8-10 years.

50% Cabernet Sauvignon,

40% Merlot,

10% Cabernet Franc

Vineyards:

Pheasant Run,
Pepper Bridge,
Seven Hills,
Waliser Farms

**K Vintners
The Magnificent Wine
Company
Syrah 02 \$25**

Building on the success of his Syrah label, K Vintners owner/winemaker Charles Smith created his negociant label.

The concept behind the MWC is to capitalize on the premium fruit market from vintage to vintage and produce a variety of quality wines under one label.

The name was coined one day when a friend called Charles "Mr. Magnificent"!

Jancis Robinson had this to say about K Vintners on her website :

"One of the most inspiring to have come my way was K Vintners, a modest ranch in Walla Walla, Washington's most prestigious red wine region with a surprising paucity of vineyards (just 1,000 acres) though not wineries. There seems to be a strong Bonny Doon ethic here with bottlings going by such respective names as The Beautiful and The Boy. Syrah is the variety of choice with winemaker Charles Smith (who intrigued me with his claim that his brother was "head of Queens' Cambridge")."



New Discoveries Club

South Willamette Valley Focus

Iris Hill Pinot noir 02 \$20

90 points from Wine Enthusiast. This new winery started with their prices set very reasonably. Although accolades for the wines have led to some price increases, the wines are still excellent values.

This small, new winery is producing high quality, easy drinking, delicious wines that are still bargain priced. Grab this wine while it's such a deal!

From the winery: "Lovely bright crimson color with aromas of black cherry, vanilla, cinnamon and cloves. Balanced acidity and medium tannins make this a great wine to drink now."

Food suggestions: Very versatile wine-best host/hostess wine gift to bring to dinner. Great served with duck, lamb, trout, grilled salmon with ginger and soy sauce, bleu cheese, east Indian spiced dishes.



Iris Hill Pinot gris 02 \$15

Wine Press NW named this wine the only "Double Platinum" of their annual competition and said:

"In our first four Platinum judgments, the top wine was rarely a surprise, as it came from such established wineries as L'Ecole, Kiona, Columbia Crest, Dunham and Three Rivers. This year, our "best of the best in the Great Northwest" came out of nowhere."

"Tiny Iris Hill Winery near Eugene, Ore., earned a rare Double Platinum in our fifth annual Platinum Judging, a year-end competition that includes only Northwest wines that have won gold medals this year."

"Iris Hill's first vintage was 2001, and its wines were good but somewhat unremarkable. Yet now it seems to have come into its own, as this fabulous Pinot Gris shows. Additionally, Iris Hill's 2002 Pinot Noir earned an "Outstanding" rating in our double-blind Recent Releases judgments."

Lumos Pinot gris 02 \$17

Dai Crisp is vineyard manager for several of Oregon's best, now has his own label. This is a rich wine with lots of melon and stone fruit flavors.



From the winery: "An off-dry wine full of fruit and honey with a long finish. Delicious on its own, with appetizers, an eight-course meal or a good game of Scrabble. Best when served well chilled. Grown in the Willamette Valley."

NW Dessert Wine Club

British Columbia Ice Wine!

A special treat this month, a wine that goes quite a bit above the price we usually send, to thank our Dessert Club members for their patronage.

Until recently, British Columbia's Ice Wines were not available in the US. Now, we are thrilled to offer the BC Ice Wines of Inniskillin and Jackson Triggs, and continue to offer the ice wines of Chateau Ste Michelle, Covey Run, Kiona, and Andrew Rich, all NW producers.



Jackson Triggs Ice Wine Riesling 02 375 ml \$58.00

Sipping this wine as I type, marveling at how delicious it is, how long the finish, the interesting crisp hint of green apple, the rich sweet fruit, the racy acidity, the freshness. And I opened this bottle a month ago. - j

Double Gold.Wine Press NW

Wine Press NW says:

"This large B.C. winery collects well-earned accolades throughout the year for its fabulous ice wines. One of the secrets is using Riesling, which seems to retain its natural acidity far longer than it should."

"This is a sweet, intense wine with aromas and flavors of honey, apples, pears and apricots. Won double gold at the International Eastern Wine Competition and golds at the L.A. County Fair, Northwest Wine Summit and Okanagan Fall Wine Festival Competition."



Frozen grapes ready to be pressed into ice wine

Reserve Pinot noir Club continued....

Dick is convinced that the fractured sandstone soil that underlies all the vines is the key to its terroir.

"I'm no geologist," he admits, "but what distinguishes the soils from one another is primarily the amounts of sand and clay—I think what underlies the soil is more important."

There are some spots in the vineyard where the soil is thin enough to expose the fractured sandstone, while being surrounded by deeper topsoil. After four or five years of vine growth, says Dick, there is no visual distinction whatsoever between vines whose roots have penetrated to the sandstone level and those that were planted on the sandstone itself.

Vineyard Management

One of the keys to the success of Shea Vineyards has been a philosophy of allowing the customers—the winemakers who source their grapes from Shea—to dictate the management of the vines throughout the growing year.

Though any special requirements—like hand shoot positioning or special canopy management techniques—are paid for by the winemaker who requests them, Shea and his vineyard manager Javier Marin essentially allow their clients to direct their viticulture.

"We deal with great winemakers who obsess about these things," says Dick, "so we make suggestions and listen and work cooperatively with them to the common goal of getting great fruit."

Clearly, this is an attraction for the winemaker. "What makes the vineyard appealing to so many people," says Ken Wright, of Ken Wright Cellars, "is Dick's willingness to implement whatever techniques you want. He's willing to work with people so long as they are prepared to pay the costs of the practice. The thing that's so awesome about this is his willingness to do it on a small scale, even an acre or two."

Even so, there are certain management practices that apply throughout the vineyard. "We are completely dry farmed for fruiting vines," explains Dick (newly planted vines will get hand-watering to assure their early health). "I'm a big believer that that's important in allowing the terroir to show through in the wines."

Similarly, no soil fertilizers or amendments are used. Foliar nutrients, primarily kelp, may be added to protect against nitrogen deficiencies, but the basic philosophy is to do the minimal intervention, and only to assure the healthy and life of the plant.

Vine spacing and trellising is also fairly uniform throughout the vineyard. From the beginning, planting was done on a 5 x 7 system (vines are planted 5-ft. apart, and rows are 7-ft. apart) to 1,245 vines per acre. Despite the trendiness of denser plantings, Dick has maintained the original spacing on new plantings.

"When I look around at different vineyards and their spacings, I don't really see a correlation with the accolades and ratings their wines get."

Vines and Clones

Shea Vineyards is overwhelmingly a Pinot noir vineyard, though small amounts of Chardonnay and Pinot gris plantings have achieved loyal followings among the consumers of winemakers producing Shea wines in these categories.

Shea Vineyards was originally planted to Pommard (60%) and Wädenswil (40%) clones of Pinot noir, which were essentially the only two clones in use in the late 1980s. Subsequent replantings and new plantings have included a mixture of six different Dijon clone Pinot noir varieties.



Shea Wine Cellars

Pinot noir "Homer" 03 \$65

The 2002 Homer was an opulent, sophisticated wine. The 2003 is even more so, with an additional component of bounteous fruit forwardness. Another year of working with the Shea Vineyards fruit has given Sam Tannahill even more finesse with the grapes.

You may know of Sam Tannahill- he was co-winemaker with Gary Andrus at Archery Summit during the years when the Archery Pinot noirs received a series of the highest ratings for Pinots in the country. He's expert at producing Pinot noirs of dark color, with silky texture, complex multilayered flavors, long finish, and continued satisfaction across the cellar life of the wine.

Last year, Sam's first "Homer" 02 for Shea Wine Cellars (Patricia Green made the previous vintage) received high ratings, and was a hit with Avalon's Pinot-philies.

The 2003 is a better wine - Sam is now settled in to the winery, has more experience with the Shea Vineyard fruit, was able to draw from some of the very best fruit in the vineyard, as contracts with some wineries lapsed and were not renewed.

Although 2003 was a very tough vintage, the Shea vineyard management team know what they are doing and were able to avoid the problems of over-ripe fruit and uneven ripening that plagued some vineyards during the super hot vintage. And you give Sam good fruit, you know he's going to make an extraordinary wine.

Sam does something very difficult in fermenting his Pinots that I believe he learned both in France and while working with Gary Andrus. He uses large wooden fermenters, rather than the stainless or plastic bins most other wineries use. Fermentation is harder to control in wood, but the process seems to increase the texture of the wine, it adds that subtle shot-silk sensation across the roof of your mouth, and perhaps (my idea) increases the intensity of the floral notes in Pinot noir (violets and roses). His meticulous winemaking and talented choice of oak result in really great wine, and he is a proven expert, with highest ratings over many vintages.

Shea Wine Cellars

Pinot noir "Block 23" 03 \$48

Seductive, rich, always an intense, dark Pinot noir, the 2003 is a bit more fruit forward and immediately approachable than the 2002 vintage. It's yummy now, and a good acid/tannin balance lends itself to cellaring for 5-8 years. Hearty, black fruit flavors are intermingled with hints of fresh earth, and just a hint of violets in the finish.