



**Oregon Wine Magazine Article, by Rich Hopkins
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(edited down for website use)

Oregon Wine Magazine: Steve Anderson. You're the winemaker here at Eola Hills Wine Cellars, I understand. That's the classiest title of all. Are you from around here originally?

Steve Anderson: I'm from Oregon. Milwaukie...born and raised.

OWM: When did you start working here at Eola Hills?

SA: October 15th, 1993, at 3 P.M.

OWM: Sounds like an anniversary coming up here. Did you come here as winemaker?

SA: No, I was the cellar rat.

OWM: A noble beginning!You must be pretty confident in your abilities by now.

SA: I hope so.

OWM: As winemaker, how much do you have to do in the way of personnel management, work organization ... or do you mainly stay with the wine?

SA: Yes, certainly. I mean, I have a really good staff, an assistant winemaker, a mechanic, a cellar person. My assistant pretty much handles the day-to-day operations, keeping things going. But as far as what needs to be done and when it needs to be done, I tell him that, but I don't just sit in the office. I'm out tasting barrels, making decisions on when to rack things. I try to be more hands-on, less administrative.

OWM: Then you're not out there buying grapes?

SA: No, the fruit that we're buying, most of it, a lot of it, we're getting from our own vineyards. We planted Wolf Hill Vineyards in '96; it just came into full production this year. So we'll be buying less fruit this year than in years past. The people that we continue to buy fruit from have been supplying us with fruit for many years. So there's not a lot of time spent visiting vineyards, negotiating contracts, buying new fruit. Less and less often do I need to go out into the vineyards and check. When I hear of a problem, I know what it's going to be before it even happens. I just know. I'm able to expect it. Or, I might ask, "Have you done this spray yet?"

OWM: Then you also have a big business in custom-crush work, I understand.

SA: That's right. This year we are making more wine from custom-crushed grapes than we are making in-house under our own label—a first for us. We're doing almost three-hundred tons for Eola Hills Wine Cellars proper, and I'd say we're doing close to nine-hundred tons for the custom-crush business. I have two contracts that are each over three-hundred tons.

OWM: Do you figure a ton of grapes produces about a hundred-twenty-five gallon of wine?

SA: That's right. I think we crushed eight-hundred-forty tons last year, for Eola Hills and our custom-crush customers. About a hundred-thirty-thousand gallons.

OWM: Well, that puts you guys right up there with the big boys. About third or fourth from the top?

SA: Usually about fifth, (out of about 200 Oregon Wineries) according to the OLCC [Oregon Liquor Control Commission] reports of wine sold. I don't know about gallons produced. I don't get those figures about other wineries.

OWM: All those OLCC figures are becoming less and less important.

SA: That seems to be the case. We're going to do almost two-hundred-thousand gallons this crush. If I had to guess, without having figures in front of me.

OWM: Can you give me a breakdown on varieties you produce?

SA: Are you ready to write? Pinot noir, Pinot gris, Chardonnay, Müller-Thurgau, Gewürtztraminer, White Riesling, Merlot, Cabernet sauvignon, Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Muscat, Fortified Raspberry dessert wine, Port from Cabernet Sauvignon, Maréchal Foch, Niagara, Pinot blanc. I think that's it. Some of those are custom-crushed wines: Müller-Thurgau, Niagara, White Riesling, Pinot blanc.

OWM: Tell me about your use of oak barrels.

SA: I keep about eighteen-hundred barrels— about sixty-percent French, thirty-percent American oak, ten-percent Hungarian.

OWM: Do you have a program for replacing old barrels?

SA: Sure. For the overall cooperage, I bring in about twelve- to fifteen-percent “new wood” each year.... But within individual varieties or specified lots, like my Pinot noirs, I don’t like to use more than thirty-percent new. So a lot of the new wood goes into Pinot noir and Chardonnay.

OWM: So, for your Pinot noir—about how much?

SA: For the Reserve, I don’t like to use more than thirty-percent. It’s easy to over-oak. I would rather have our customers taste the grape the wine was made from rather than the barrel it was fermented in. There are some others, who will remain nameless, who tend, in my opinion, to over-oak their wines. But they’re marketing to a different niche than ours.

OWM: Is this a trend for Oregon wine? To move from the more traditionally oaked, in some cases heavily oaked, wines? Wine consumers these days seem to like the “fruit-forward” style, as we call it.

SA: I agree. I can name only a few that I could say over-oak their wines. Those individuals are selling bottles of Pinot noir at fifty- to seventy-dollars, and, you know, it’s *all* in brand new oak.

OWM: Don’t you have to keep it in the cellar for a while?

SA: Certainly. If you have the ability to cellar wines properly, then by all means over-oak your wines and then age them. That may make them great. But here at Eola Hills, only our estate vineyard, Wolf Hill, gets that thirty-percent new-oak treatment. Fruit from other vineyards get less new oak. We have the luxury of keeping those wines in the bottle for a year before they get released. Everything else is released as we bottle it.

OWM: Tom Huggins is general manager here at Eola Hills. I find him a pretty unassuming guy.

SA: He sure is. And a lot of that manner comes with time and comfortableness and confidence. My assumption is that he has great confidence in me and lets me do what I need to make great wine. So, we get along pretty well. Tom was the first winemaker here. He’s the founder, the one who started it. He planted the vineyards. He’s done every job there is to do here— besides being winemaker,

he's cleaned the buckets, climbed the ladders, driven the forklift. I mean, he's done it all. Before we had the digital, high-speed label applicator, for example, Tom was putting the labels on by hand with the glue machine. Today, I probably couldn't put him on the high-speed labeler and expect to get the labels straight or right side up, but give him the old glue machine and some paper labels and you can't mess around with him.

OWM: What did you do before you got into commercial winemaking?

SA: I was a student at Oregon State University.

OWM: Studying what?

SA: Horticulture. My original career goal was to be a nurseryman, but I ended up being a winemaker. Total serendipity here. Just kind of fell into my lap. It helped that I'd been a hobby winemaker since I was thirteen...

OWM: A hobby wine drinker since thirteen?

SA: Hobby winemaker. So I knew what *ML* fermentation was. I knew about adding sulfites and infiltration and things like that. My chemistry studies and plant pathology, physiology, and so on, plus my interest in winemaking, brought everything together. I filled all these little niches here. They needed someone who was very mechanical, so if something broke, as assistant wine maker I was the one who probably broke it, or was there when it broke, and was able to fix it. I've been here almost ten years.

OWM: You've had a career already. You could retire.

SA: Oh, I wish.

OWM: It seems nobody can retire anymore.

SA: They keep raising the age. It's at seventy-two now. By the time I'm ready to retire it'll be a hundred-and-two.

OWM: The way I look at it, people your age are going to work till they drop.

SA: I'm putting enough away that I can at least survive when it's time to retire, hopefully.

[*Tom Huggins comes in from the busy crush pad...*]

OWM: You've got time to take me on the tour now?

Tom Huggins: I want to show you what we are doing in the retail side of the business.

[Huggins and I were standing in the middle of the original winery and tasting-room building.]

You remember where our offices were? In the corner next to the entry way, by the tasting room? We took all the offices out of there and put them into the second building we acquired. *[An onion processing plant at the time. We were strolling over there for a look.]*

We changed this building to hold our office. We put in a new floor here, put our bottling line down at the other end of the building and moved the new bottles there. We did that so the noise wouldn't interfere with our winery events for the public, Sunday Brunch, and so on. This building is where we keep most of our barrels.

It's really 'way more functional like this. Every Friday we used to convert the old place from a winery to a restaurant....*Every Friday.*

OWM: I remember.

[We had headed back to the first building]

TH: Since this is the space we want to keep for our Sunday brunches, so this is where we've got our refrigerator and stoves and stuff like that, a dishwasher, so we've basically made it into a full-sized commercial kitchen for Chef Ramon Simbec, our brunch guy. We're going to move the walls out a little bit and then put a door from the kitchen to the outside. We covered the walls with wood to make it look like barrels... kind of.

Now the same person can take care of events and watch over the tasting room at the same time. We added two handicap rest rooms. With the offices gone, we were able to expand and improve the tasting room. After about January we're going to put in one of those antique-looking floors.

[We stepped outside from the tasting room.]

Looks like we've got a party here today. Out here we are going to have a nice bar, a barbecue area and a place to do outside events. We'll have a covered area for the bar and lattice overhead for a shade area. Then we're thinking about doing another pond out here. The old barbecue we are taking out.

OWM: Who's the genius behind all of this.

TH: Me. Well, we have a good system here. My brother Jim takes care of all the grapes, and Steve will tell you that that's eighty-percent of it, getting good fruit. But Jim's the one that gets us the good fruit. We get grapes from lots of different vineyards. That gives Steve the opportunity to make the best possible wines. So we kind of have the opposite philosophy to an "estate" operation. I think when we get all this remodeling done, we'll have it really nice. I mean already with the cosmetics that we've done to the front, we've seen a big change. The traffic is a lot busier than in the past, maybe a twenty-five percent improvement.