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At Urban Wineworks, Katie Light (left) and Carol Somers taste chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah by wineries that will be featured in the third annual Portland Indie Wine Festival this weekend in the Pearl District.

Wines are the stars at this indie festival

Vineyards | Call them rebels or mom-and-pop shops, these small producers have their own cachet and growing fan base

By **DANA TIMS**
THE OREGONIAN

Tom Mortimer's dream of making Oregon pinot noir took him in 1997 to a Dundee hillside strewn with so much broken basalt that it looked more like a dry riverbed than prime vineyard land.

"I don't even know how you're going to get posts in the ground," a consultant warned him. "You can probably grow grapes here, but certainly not economically."

That was all Mortimer needed to hear. He bought the 28-acre site, hammered in a parcel of posts and now sells \$45 bottles of premium pinot noir under his Le Cadeau Vineyard label.

"I never had any interest in making run-of-the-mill tourist wines," Mortimer said. "If I was going to do it, I wanted to do something special."

Even as tsunami-like waves of money splash into Oregon's \$1 billion wine industry, its "small is beautiful" essence still tends to dominate. Huge amounts of cash can buy expanded national distribution, state-of-the-art wineries and prime retail shelf space, but the mom-and-pop operations that founded the state's industry continue to define it.

Nowhere will that be more in evidence than this weekend, when 41 wineries, in-

cluding Mortimer's Le Cadeau, gather for the third annual Portland Indie Wine Festival. The two-day event is expected to draw hundreds of Oregon wine lovers from around the country.

The festival, juried by a panel of nationally recognized wine experts, celebrates Oregon's top small producers — those making 2,000 cases or fewer of the current vintage.

By comparison, average annual production for the state's 350 bonded wineries runs about 5,000 cases. Oregon's largest winery, A to Z Wineworks in Dundee, expects to turn out about 160,000 cases this year, thanks in part to its recent acquisition of another large producer, Rex Hill Vineyard in Newberg.

But if big players are getting the headlines

Portland Indie Wine Festival

Where: Urban Wineworks, 407 N.W. 16th Ave., Portland

When: 3 to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Tickets: \$60 for one day, \$100 for both (includes food, wineglass)

Information: 503-595-0891; www.indiewinefestival.com

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Indies: Out-of-state attendees half of the crowd

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— witness Washington vino kingpin Sie Michelle Wine Estate's high profile 2006 purchase of Oregon's Earth Vineyards — the state's small winemakers consistently emerge as some of the business's most passionate practitioners.

That's fine with larger producers, who credit indie winemakers with helping cultivate new customers.

"Five years ago, our industry was really worried, just sweating bullets, about where we would find the next generation of wine drinkers," said Jim Bernau, founder of Willamette Valley Vineyards in Turner, one of Oregon's largest wineries. "Most of

us who have been around a long time, after all, are aging baby boomers. But these small winemakers are, in their own way, rebels and we're finding that younger people have a very strong emotional connection with that.

"What's really amazing is that this next generation is now appearing before our eyes and, quite frankly, we didn't have anything to do with it."

Some industry analysts remain uncomfortable with the term "mom and pop," saying it connotes something more amateurish than is actually taking place in Oregon's vineyards and wineries. They are also quick to note that some of the labels featured in this year's Indie Wine Festival are pet projects of winemakers who also run much bigger operations.

Bill Hatcher, A to Z's co-owner, for instance, is participating in this year's festival through his own Hatcher label. In some years, he makes fewer than 400 cases, but insists there is plenty of room in the industry for both

big and small producers.

Even the big-money wineries in Oregon are still bit players compared with their California counterparts, which sometimes produce millions of cases a year but the state's larger producers guarantee publicity on a national level and play an important role in promoting Brand Oregon.

"When you look at Oregon as a whole, the unique feature we have are the small producers," Hatcher said. "Our real cachet is this mystique of being a pioneering place off the beaten track."

Indie Wine Festival-goers appear to be finding their way just fine.

Nearly half of last year's approximately 750 attendees came from outside the state, said festival founder Lisa Donoughue. In all, 18 states were represented, she said.

About two-thirds of those surveyed cited access to hard-to-find boutique wines as their primary reason for attending. And while half said they drink the wines they buy within one

month, just as many consider themselves collectors.

So far, ticket sales to this year's festival are running about 60 percent ahead of last year, Donoughue said.

"What we're really trying to do is create for Oregon's small, indie wine producers the same aura that the Sundance Film Festival does for independent films," she said.

Jason Lett's Black Cap pinot noir, even among indies, is small. He made only 225 cases last year and is finding that demand is far outstripping supply. Still, he is participating in this year's festival as a way to meet directly with potential customers who otherwise might never see his wines on their local shelves.

"I want to stay small, but my wines are becoming well known by people who want some," Lett said. "It's all part of the indie ethos, and Oregon is definitely its epicenter."

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