

Climate report says North Olympic Peninsula good grape growing land for wine

By Diane Urbani de la Paz, Peninsula Daily News

PORT ANGELES - We're young, warm and willing to sweat.

And that makes the North Olympic Peninsula a viable place for vineyards, according to Greg Jones, a Southern Oregon University climatologist who specializes in identifying good grape-growing land.

"There's a lot of potential here," Jones said Friday at the Port Angeles City Council Chambers.

Calling the Peninsula a "young grape-growing region," he presented results of a study conducted at the request of 52 local business people and organizations interested in this place as a viticultural frontier.

The driving force behind the study was Kathy Charlton, owner of Olympic Cellars just east of Port Angeles.

She and Port Angeles Mayor Karen Rogers, City Councilwoman Edna Petersen and several Peninsula wineries cooperatively funded the \$15,000 cost of Jones' research.

"This is like having a baby," Charlton said of the nine-month study.

She usually has her grapes shipped from eastern Washington.

But earlier this year, Charlton and Olympic Cellars winemaker Benoit Murat bottled 35 cases of wine with fruit from the Dungeness Bay Vineyard near Sequim.

They named the grapefruity white blend Vin Nouveau - and watched it sell out fast.

That Nouveau could be the harbinger of our next agriventure, Jones said.

A warmer Peninsula

Global climate change is warming the Peninsula - he's seen the evidence in temperature data over three decades - and that means grapevines can thrive here.

In terms of weather, "you're only going to see increased suitability," Jones said.

Some 12,000 acres of Peninsula river valleys and foothills have the soil, sun, elevation and sloping topography for good grapes, Jones added.

But with only a portion of Clallam and Jefferson counties' lands zoned for agriculture, not all can be planted in vines.

Surveying the Peninsula through the zoning prism, Jones said only about 2,000 acres are available for wine grape cultivation.

And it's not just about zoning. It's also about dirt and heat.

Growers will need grit to make this to become Washington's next wine-rich region.

"There still need to be pioneers who stick their necks out," Jones said, adding that he knows Peninsula farmers, through the decades, have already shown they're willing to "put in the sweat."

Skeptics proven wrong

Other Northwest vineyards have proved skeptics wrong, he said.

"In the 1960s, when the first people went into the Umpqua Valley of Oregon" - where Jones himself makes wine – "they were told they were nuts."

Same thing happened in the '70s in the Willamette Valley.

Wine drinkers scoffed while growers got to work.

Their fruit yields were low and their quality high.

"That drove the price up," Jones said.

Connoisseurs were converted, and now the Willamette is one of Oregon's well-loved wine regions.

Vineyards now grow in nearly every region across the continent, and each presents challenges, Jones said.

"You do the best you can with what you've got."

But the Peninsula has major factors in its favor.

A populous and thirsty market is nearby in the Seattle metropolitan area.

And the area has what it takes to grow a healthy culinary tourism industry - with the cool climate that produces light, crisp wines that complement the local seafood.

Flourishing types

But growers here must not insist on cultivating only the big-name grape varieties.

Those most likely to flourish in Peninsula conditions include Siegerrebe, Madeleine Angevine and Sylvaner, Jones said.

Charlton and Murat planted a small vineyard of those three grape varieties in March, in the shadow of their winery on U.S. Highway 101.

It will be years, of course, before they pick and crush the fruit.

Those years will bring warmer weather, Jones predicted.

He has been among the first to forecast, at international meetings, the effects of global warming on wine-grape growing around the world.

"The climate is changing over time, and we really need to look at that," he said, though he added that his study didn't delve into the Peninsula's water supply and irrigation networks.

But if population growth and global warming are likely to make land and water scarcer, should we worry about devoting too much of those resources to wine and not enough to food?

The European Union is beginning to grapple with that question, Jones said.

And Australia, with its vast swaths of arid land, may also face a conflict between the lucrative wine industry and its people's need to eat.

Clallam County Commissioner Steve Tharinger, D-Dungeness, doesn't see the vineyard-versus-vegetables conflict as a problem on the Peninsula - yet.

He believes his district, once devoted to dairy farms, faces a more immediate threat in the hunger for housing.

"The big advantage of this [grape-growing] is that it's not developing and paving over" the land, he said after Jones' presentation.

"Keeping the land in agriculture is the No. 1 issue. And it is doable," Tharinger added.

"What we're working on as a region is broadening our economic base and our agricultural base."

Jones, when asked whether table grapes could be a viable crop on the Peninsula, said the climate is still too cool to produce marketable fruit.

The coming thing, he emphasized, is catering to food and wine lovers who come looking for fresh seafood paired with fine local vintages.

That reminded Charlton of another attractive, even intoxicating, fruit.

"When you talk about culinary tourism," she said, "we have a lot of apples around here.

"We've tasted hard cider from different varieties of apples, and it was amazing."