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## **Vintners look for right grapes to grow in rainy Puget Sound**

**By GENE JOHNSON**  
*The Associated Press*

People who wandered into the Olympic Cellars winery in a century-old barn on the northern tip of the Olympic Peninsula typically had two questions for its owners.

Where are the bathrooms? And where are the grapes?

"We finally got smart and put up a sign for the restrooms," owner Kathy Charlton says.

For the second question, they commissioned a study.

Like the vast majority of the 400-plus wineries in the state, Olympic Cellars had always obtained its grapes from vineyards in hot, dry Eastern Washington, which has gained a reputation as some of the best wine country in the United States.

The study is one of two aimed at refuting the notion that good wine grapes — in particular, red wine grapes — can't be grown on the wet side of the Cascade Range and finding a valuable crop to preserve farmland under increasing development pressure.

"Western Washington is the great untapped vineyard resource," says Keith Love, a spokesman for the state's most prominent winery, Chateau Ste. Michelle in Woodinville. "The potential is there, but there hasn't been enough research done. We are glad somebody's able to do it."

At Charlton's request, Southern Oregon University professor Greg Jones is studying the climate and soils of the Olympic Peninsula, hoping to identify the best spots to grow grapes. Charlton says she doesn't have much inclination to grow grapes herself, but she would love to make a pinot noir, pinot blanc or other wines from locally grown grapes that can be paired with locally caught seafood.

In Mount Vernon, 60 miles north of Seattle, researchers from Washington State University have been testing for the past five years to find grapes that can be grown throughout Western Washington's many micro-climates, with promising results. The broad, flat valley near the mouth of the Skagit River is one of the coolest spots around Puget Sound, so if grapes can grow well

there they should be able to grow well in other parts, such as the warmer, south-facing slopes of the Cascade foothills.

"The interest is just getting going," says Gary Moulton, the lead WSU researcher. "As people start moving from hobby winemaking to cottage industry, you're going to see a lot of boutique-type wineries. We don't have a lot of big, thousand-acre chunks of land like they do in Eastern Washington, but we're going to have a lot of smaller vineyards that can make a [tourist] destination. People want to try local wines."

Washington is the nation's second-biggest wine producer, behind California. A new winery opens every 15 days on average, according to the Washington Wine Commission. More than 30,000 acres are devoted to wine-grape growing in the state, but less than 1 percent of that is in Western Washington.

Most of the vineyards are in the south-central and eastern parts of the state, where the rich volcanic soils, hot summers and low rainfall make for perfect growing conditions.

The Puget Sound region west of the Cascades is cooler and gets about 48 inches of rain a year — six times more than Eastern Washington. For decades, that led to a perception that it was hardly worth growing wine grapes here. Even the grapes at Chateau Ste. Michelle's suburban Seattle winery were planted only for decoration.

To the contrary, Moulton says Puget Sound compares favorably to some of the best growing regions in France and Germany. WSU's research has shown potential for cool-weather grapes, including sauvignon blanc and pinot noir precose, as well as lesser known varieties such as the red agria.

Much of Oregon's best wine country is on the west side of the Cascades, and though it's a bit warmer than Western Washington the climate isn't that different, Moulton says.

A handful of Western Washington vineyards have grown white wine grapes — semillon and siegerebbe, among others — for years, but more have recently started planting reds based on the research.

Up the Skagit River from Moulton's 1.5-acre test plot, the Glacier Peak Winery has planted agria on his recommendation.

Just across the road, Drew Zimmerman, Carl Engebret and Ector DeLeon have planted several varieties, but mostly pinot noir, at the 73-acre farm where they also make hard cider. Moulton comes over on Fridays for tastings.

"Ultimately, we want to be a Puget Sound winery," Zimmerman says. "We want to be among the pioneers of west-side grape growing."