

THE RISE OF Oregon Syrah

REUSTLE-PRAYER ROCK VINEYARDS IN OREGON'S UMPQUA VALLEY IS HELPING USHER IN A SYRAH REVOLUTION

by Jonathan Cristaldi / photos courtesy Reustle-Prayer Rock Vineyards



Stephen Reustle, owner and winemaker, Reustle-Prayer Rock Vineyards.

STEPHEN REUSTLE HADN'T PLANNED ON BOOKING A FLIGHT to Sydney, Australia during the 2015 harvest, but an email from Judith Kennedy, President of the 6 Nations Wine Challenge, changed all that. It turned out that Reustle's 2012 Syrah from Oregon's Umpqua Valley had taken first place at the competition, which is held annually in Sydney. Kennedy had passed along a request from the U.S. Ambassador to Australia, John Berry, that Reustle should come and accept the award in person.

When Reustle (pronounced "Russell") heard the news that his Syrah came in at first place, he was elated, and also felt an incredible sense of accomplishment—years of going against the grain had proven he was on the right path. "Most people would grimace at the Brix we pick it at," he told me over the phone, back in December; "we are picking at 21 to 22 Brix, and what we get is a more Northern Rhône style, with intense spice and pepper."

In the Syrah category, 52 wines were competing, many from Australia, where, as Reustle points out, "they [tend to] like bigger alcohol, fruit-driven Syrahs, but ours is leaner; more elegant with complex spice character—and yet, we were selected number one. I think that says something about changing palates across wine judges, and across consumer interest."

Reustle is the head winemaker at Reustle-Prayer Rock Vineyards. His love affair with wine dates back to his days running a marketing firm while living in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He had the creative idea to host client networking events around wine tastings, and with good wine and friendly camaraderie came new business. Eventually, the firm was so successful it merged with a publicly traded company and Reustle was able to cash out to pursue his dream of making wine.

Reustle and his wife Gloria moved West and he spent a year looking at appellations from Temecula up to Walla Walla, when he stumbled upon a 146-acre property in the Umpqua Valley. "I had never heard of the Umpqua Valley," he said, "and it was really known as the timber capital of the world." But once he saw the land, which was being reforested with Douglas fir trees, he noticed the contours—gorgeous south-facing slopes that reminded him of rolling vineyards he'd seen in Burgundy. Reustle crammed in two weeks of soil and climate studies, bought the property, and moved his wife and their two children to Oregon. "It was a Jed Clampett move feeling," said Reustle.

In 2001, they cleared the land, put in roads, a pond, irrigation and a year later planted ten acres adding four to six more each year until vines covered 40 acres, yielding roughly 8,000 cases annually.

Armed with experience working tractors in orchards in his youth, Reustle also taught himself to make wine. He learned most everything from textbooks and also hired reputable consultants like Joe Dobbles, of Dobbles Family Estate in Dundee, Oregon, and one of the world's leading viticulturists, Dr. Richard Smart, author of *Sunlight into Wine*.



Reustle also hired Dr. Gregory Jones to produce a climate study of his property based on Jones's work around the Winkler Heat Index (see the July-June 2015 and August-September 2015 issues of *The SOMM Journal* for our ongoing series on climate-change featuring Dr. Jones). On Dr. Jones's recommendations, Reustle planted Range 4 grapes—ideal for Semillon, Merlot and Tempranillo—but he also decided to plant grapes that fall into Ranges 3 and 5: Pinot Noir; Grüner Veltliner; Syrah; Viognier and Muscat, among others.

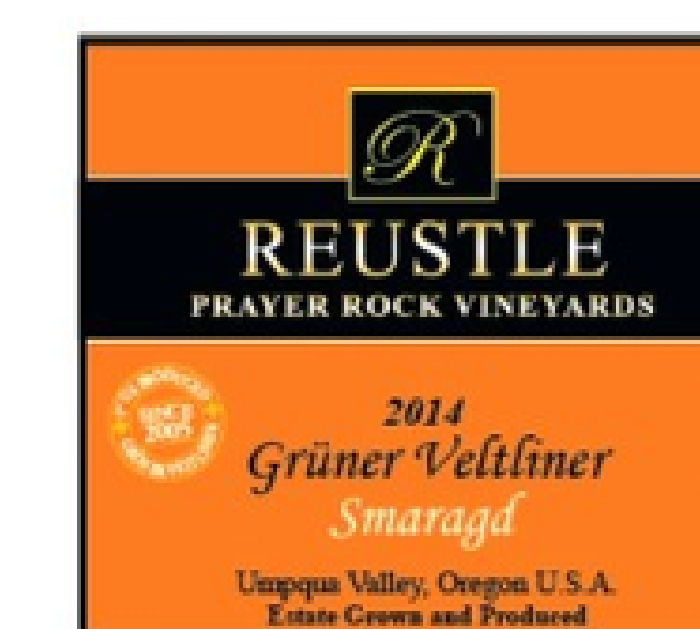
And as evidenced by the winery's nearly

500 medals and 6 Nations Challenge first place prize, their Syrahs and Grüners are outperforming the rest (it's interesting to note that in 2005, Reustle was the first winery in the U.S. to varietally label a wine as Grüner Veltliner). In 2010, Reustle hired Wade Smith to help with marketing and graphic design and two years later promoted him to Assistant Winemaker. "We're a small company," said Reustle; "we all do a bit of everything."

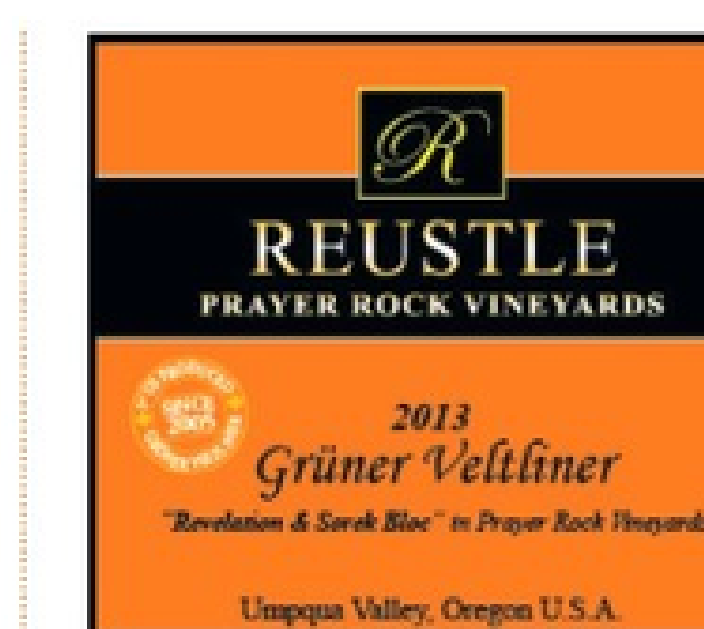
Their Syrah grapes, planted to clones 383, 877, 470, Clone Noir and Clone Shiraz, are hand-picked in mornings by friends from church groups in the community, then go into four- to six-day cold soaks, with daily punch-downs during fermentation before aging in new and used French and American oak. Grüner grapes are whole-cluster pressed in tank immediately, inoculated and fermented at low temperatures for a couple of months.

In recent years, Reustle notes, millions of investment dollars have begun pouring into the Umpqua Valley and says "we're beginning to see there are quality wineries here making world class wines." And with an abundance of water; good labor force, and a new program in viticulture and state-of-the-art facility at Umpqua Community College, we just might be seeing and hearing a lot more from these Oregonians. SJ

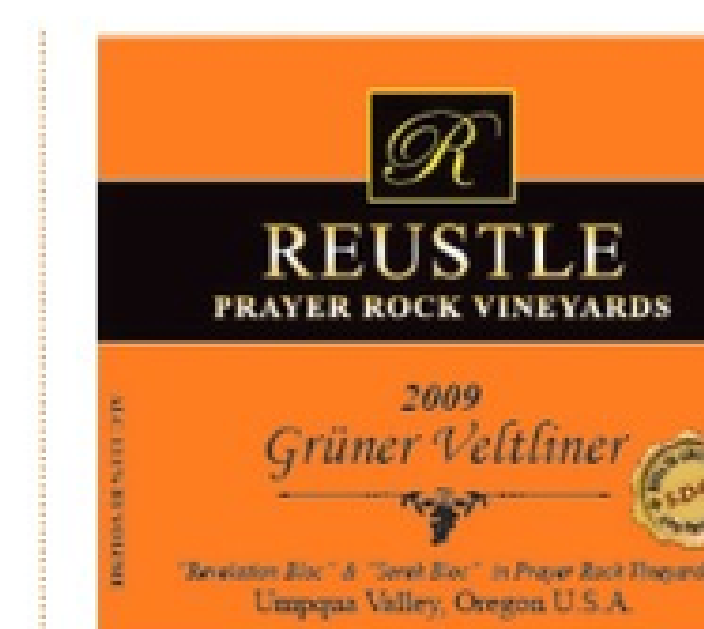
TASTING REPORT *All prices are suggested retail.*



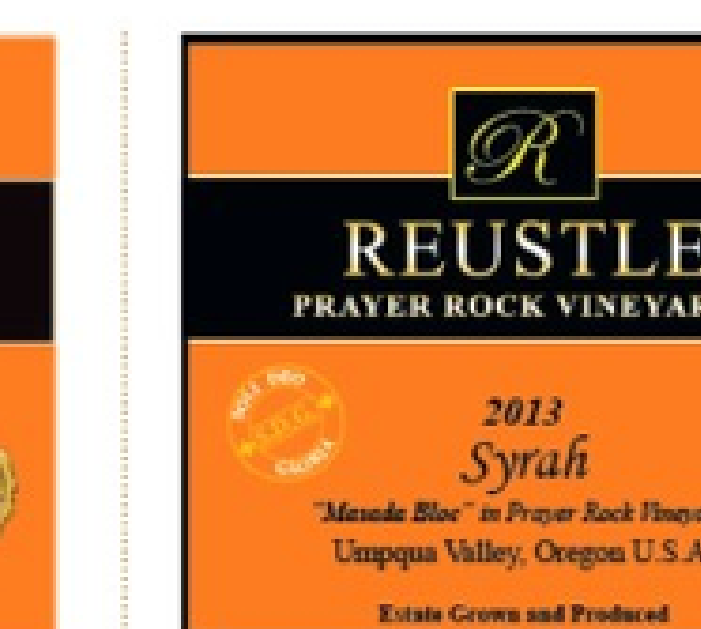
Reustle 2014 Grüner Veltliner "Smaragd," Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$32) Classic lanolin and wet wool; bright citrus and gorgeous flinty minerality on nose and palate; mouth-tingling acidity.



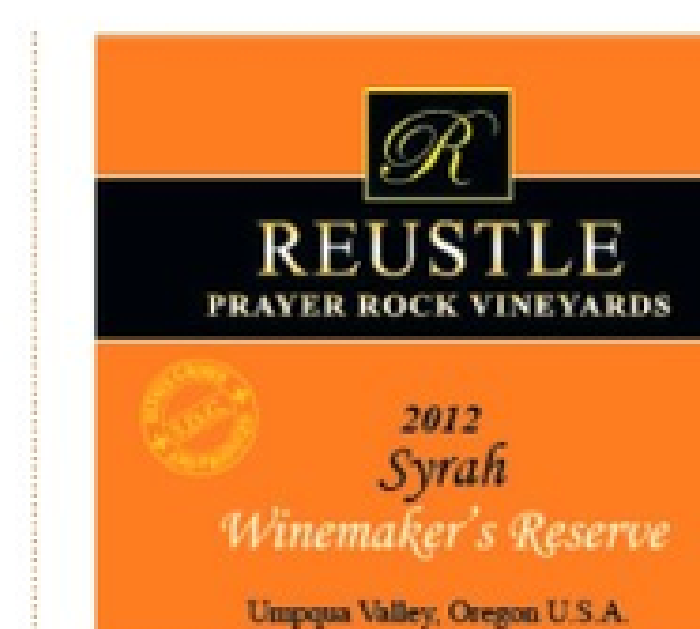
Reustle 2013 Grüner Veltliner, Revelation & Sorek Bloc, Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$24) A weightier wine from this bloc; ripe pear and green apple skin; same bright mineral character; more chalky than flinty and great acidity.



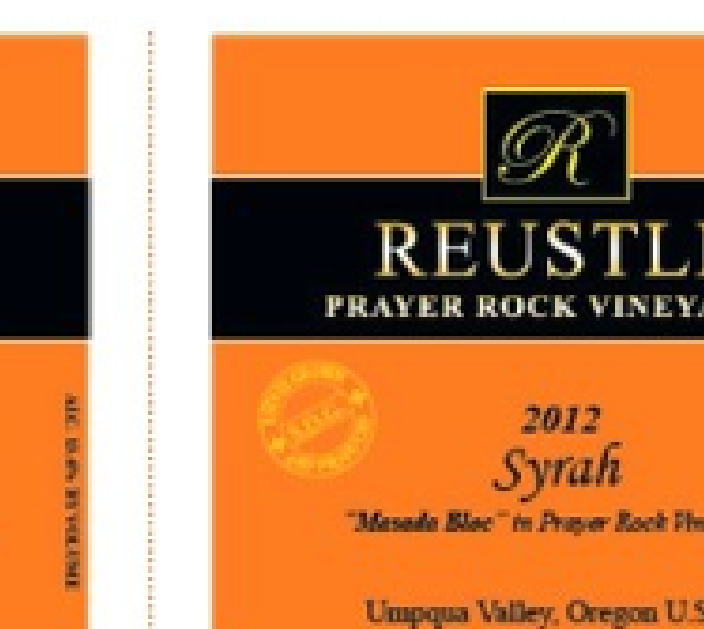
Reustle 2009 Grüner Veltliner, Revelation & Sorek Bloc, Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$24) Hints of smoke and flint on the nose and wet wool; yellow apples and ripe pear; that flinty minerality carries through with nice acidity and sumptuous lingering finish.



Reustle 2013 Syrah, Masada Bloc, Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$32) Gorgeously perfumed nose of rose petals; raspberry and black cherry; sweet spice; juicy on the palate with supple tannins; beautiful fresh red berry and black cherry fruit; long cocoa finish.



Reustle 2012 Syrah, Masada Bloc, Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$39) Red berry and blueberry compote; white pepper; smoked meats and dried violets; incredibly supple tannins; red berry character; violets, lavender; wild herbs and a touch of licorice. **6 Nations Wine Challenge Double Gold winner tied for 3rd place.**



Reustle 2012 Syrah, Masada Bloc, Prayer Rock Vineyards, Umpqua Valley, Oregon (\$32) Brambly, red currants, black pepper; pretty red floral notes; delicate black and blue fruit; tobacco spice, cocoa, wild herbs and espresso on a long finish. **6 Nations Wine Challenge 1st place winner**



View of Romancing Rock Vineyard, one of two estate vineyards owned by Reustle-Prayer Rock Vineyards. The other, Prayer Rock Vineyard, was named after a daily prayer spot and Romancing Rock was named for a story not suitable for these pages. The vineyards are close to the Umpqua River, so afternoons bring cooling Pacific breezes, and the Umpqua Valley's 30-degree diurnal temperature swings aid in acid retention in grapes.