

## A Single Lens: Fermentation In The Willamette Valley | Oregon /October 3, 2016 By Matt Wieland



***Matthew Wieland resides in Portland, Oregon, where he explores the world of wine and vine with a focus on the wines of the Northwest. He works in the Willamette Valley wine industry and as an independent wine writer.***

Touring wineries, many tasting room staff mention, “We use native yeasts from the vineyard for our fermentations.” Occasionally followed by, “This allows the truest expression of our vineyard.” What does this exactly mean? Is it accurate or romantic whitewashing? Why don’t wineries that inoculate confidently state that they use commercial yeast? These questions and answers are relevant and impactful anywhere people make wine. During a recent tour through the Willamette Valley, I explored the answers to these questions through interviews with three winemakers, all of whom practice the science and art of fermentation differently.



Cody Wright of Purple Hands with his family |  
Photo Credit: Purple Hands Winery

### Cody Wright Of Purple Hands

Dressed sharply with a crisp polo, pressed shorts, and work boots, Cody Wright came prepared both for an interview and to hustle back to his new, nearly-finished winery. Cody founded [Purple Hands](#) in 2005, and comes to winemaking with perhaps the most lauded lineage in the Willamette Valley. Ken Wright, his father, founded Panther Creek in 1986, and then

created Ken Wright Cellars in 1994. Cody's stepfather, Rollin Soles, cofounded Argyle in 1986, serving as winemaker before setting out solo at ROCO, which has become his full-time work. Cody and I sat down at a rustic table at the charming Red Hills Market early one morning over coffee to discuss his preference for spontaneous fermentations (also called "wild", "native", or "indigenous" fermentation). When asked if philosophy or science drives his decision, Cody said, "It's more philosophical. I would use commercial yeast if I was making a scientific decision. It is less scientific, and more art. More of being part of something bigger than myself."

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Simultaneously, Cody made clear that he understands the current research on yeast, including studies Dr. Rich DeScenzo of ETS Labs spearheaded with Ken Wright, his father. Nearly all fermentations finish with *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, a hardy, alcohol-tolerant yeast able to take wines to dryness. *S. cerevisiae* serves as the central or only yeast present in commercial yeasts used to inoculate. It also finishes the fermentation of nearly 100% of spontaneous fermentations. Here research diverges. Dr. Rich DeScenzo has found that most "native" fermentations actually come from *S. cerevisiae* remaining in wineries from *past commercial inoculations*. Conversely, Dr. Matthew Goddard of New Zealand has found fermentations finished by non-commercial forms of *S. cerevisiae*.

Regardless of where *S. cerevisiae* originates, perhaps the first 5-8% abv of fermentation proves the most interesting. When you don't inoculate, non-*S. cerevisiae* species of yeast *can* begin fermentation until the more alcohol tolerant *S. cerevisiae* jumps in to finish the work. Cody adds, "I want a dynamic and complex amount of native strains early in the fermentation. This creates something not as fruit driven. Instead, I get a lot more savory flavors, and earth too. Ultimately, it helps me make wines bigger than myself."

## Of Belle Pente

My phone buzzed as I sat in my Coeur d'Alene hotel room while on a sales trip for my employer. Brian O'Donnell had left Portland in his car, heading west out of town on highway 26 when he dialed. **Brian O'Donnell** may be a new name to you, but he has a cult following for his expressions

## Brian O'Donnell



A beautiful sunset at Belle Pente | Photo Credit: Belle Pente Vineyard and Winery

of site at [Belle Pente](#) (which translates “beautiful slope”). Portland restaurants the likes of Little Bird have approached Brian to craft wines exclusively for their institutions, Belle Oiseau in this case, a zesty blend of Riesling, Pinot Gris, Muscat, and Gewürztraminer styled after the edelzwicker field blend of Alsace.

Brian uses Biodynamic practices in his estate vineyard, and so the use of spontaneous fermentation comes with little surprise. “We use three protocols. We prefer pied de cuvée.” This old-world method requires picking some fruit early to start a small, native fermentation (sometimes in carboys) with hopes of isolating vineyard yeast. This juice then becomes the inoculum for the rest of the wines. “We pull some juice early in the harvest, and then use one liter per ton for inoculation. This method may have the highest risk, but it highlights yeast from the vineyard—yeast strains on the skins.” In certain scenarios, Brian will use ambient yeast in the winery to start the fermentation, rather than pied de cuvée. The third protocol, if all else fails, requires him to use commercial yeast strains. Like Cody Wright, Brian makes this decision for philosophical reasons. “I want the purest expression of the site. Plus, it makes a more interesting wine with more complexity.” When asked if it is worth the risk having a slower, less reliable fermentation, Brian didn’t hesitate. “Yes, it’s worth the risk. The greater risk is making boring wine. However, it doesn’t work every year. We’ve had to inoculate. The cocktail of yeast you have in your winery will ultimately decide the fermentation.”

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Brian O'Donnell of Belle Pente  
| Photo Credit Belle Pente  
Vineyard and Winery

## Jesse Lange Of Lange Estate Winery

Amidst the bustle of bottling and pre-harvest cleaning, second generation winemaker Jesse Lange generously partook in a series of email conversations with me. With their first vintage in 1987, [Lange Estate Winery](#) has consistently garnered the attention of national press, earning the family a seat at the table of well-established wineries in the relatively young Willamette Valley.





When asked about his preference for commercial inoculation, Jesse pointedly made his case. “I’d rather select a commercial yeast for a given ferment rather than have a randomized commercial yeast ferment for me.” Early in our written dialogue, Jesse made sure I had read the ETS research about the myth of “native” fermentation. “When many winemakers and media alike speak about ‘wild’, ‘indigenous’, ‘feral’ yeasts, they are correct in saying that those yeasts do, in fact, exist and do have the potential to ferment wine grapes. That said, the data say that it’s a rather rare phenomenon that they actually participate in the primary conversion in any substantive manner. Nearly all wineries have used commercial yeasts at one time or another and, odds are, that those yeasts, given their competitive advantage to outcompete ‘wild’ yeasts, will take hold and take that ferment to dryness.”



Jesse Lange in Vineyard | Photo Credit: Lange Estate Winery

***“Left to her own devices,  
Mother Nature prefers***

He continued, “True ‘wild’ yeast ferments are few and far between as there are very, very few wineries not ‘infected’ with commercial yeast strains all over the

**vinegar.”**

ferments.”

I then asked him about the first 1-8% abv of fermentation. Couldn't this initial spontaneous fermentation, before *S. cerevisiae* takes hold, add something worth our time and attention? “I believe that healthy fermentations are critical for healthy and sound wines. Leaving that up to chance is too risky for my tolerance. Far too many variables for my threshold. . . .Risky ferments lend themselves to a host of issues. Left to her own devices, Mother Nature prefers vinegar.”

building, equipment, etc., but this doesn't preclude folks from promulgating the romantic notion of 'spontaneous' and 'wild'



Jessie Lange and Maggie | Photo Credit: Lange Estate Winery

## Conclusion

All three of these winemakers speak from positions of experience and understanding. Despite a shared awareness of the science (sometimes conflicting science), they reach varied conclusions, at times dramatically so. Purple Hands, Belle Pente, and Lange Estate all serve as wonderful exemplars of the Willamette Valley, and the specific ethos that drives their winemaking. Visiting these three producers will not disappoint.

Next time you travel to wine country, inquire, taste, and appreciate the layers this decision adds to the wine in your glass.

## Visit

[Purple Hands Winery](#): 1200 SW 99W, Dundee, OR 97115

[Belle Pente Vineyard and Winery](#): 12470 NE Rowland Rd, Carlton, OR 97111

[Lange Estate Winery](#): 18830 NE Buena Vista Dr, Dundee, OR 97115

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