

## Kevin Chambers didn't have any plans to become a vintner—but his insatiable curiosity and love of adventure led him down the path to cutting-edge wine making



By Kerry Newberry  
Photos by Gregor Torrence

**Some pairings are undeniable:** wine and cheese, rain and Oregon, hounds in the vineyard. As I crest a rustic country road, neatly lined with luxuriantly green tendrils of vines, I spot a trio of wagging tails. The greeters, introduced to me by grape-grower and winemaker Kevin Chambers, quiver with furry delight. The hairiest and largest, a salt-and-pepper-colored Akita, is aptly named Grizzly; her sidekick Labradors are Cody and Robin. Our afternoon agenda: Meander the sun-dappled **Resonance Vineyard**, tell stories, and taste wine.

Chambers, his dogs, and I stand basking in the summer glow, soaking up a jungle of colors stretching between us and High Heaven Ridge, the dividing line between earth and sky straight ahead. His story began in Eugene.

When Chambers arrived at the University of Oregon in the 1970s, he studied journalism and radio broadcasting because he wanted to be the next Walter Cronkite. He has the voice.

"I have the voice," he laughs. When he wasn't studying, Chambers honed his debating skills with his roommate well into the twilight hours. Their

topic: wine. "Grenache Rosé or Malbec Rosé, the matters we'd banter always gravitated to wine," explains Chambers.

During Chambers' senior year of college, a friend suggested he apply for a job at a local wine shop, Of Grape and Grain. Selling wine fit. And upon graduation, when Chambers was offered a gig writing news for a local radio show, he turned it down.

Instead, he took his boss at the wine shop up on an offer to open and manage a new store. "I'm taking the wine route," Chambers recalls himself saying at the time. "And I've never left the industry since."

**In 1981, Chambers parlayed his wine knowledge into words**, writing freelance articles, and ultimately, a weekly wine column for *The Register-Guard*, which he syndicated in 1983. His work as a columnist soon brought him attention in the wine community, which recruited him to be a wine judge.

First stop, the Oregon State Fair—at that time, a significant event for the wine industry. The judges that year included an esteemed columnist from the *Chicago Tribune*, Master of Wine David Lake, and writer and contributor to *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, Harriet Lembeck. Even though Chambers was admittedly star-struck by his fellow judges, his palate couldn't be swayed by them, and he ended up granting high scores to a Chardonnay deemed unworthy by his brethren (he considered the wine a bold statement by the winemaker).

To his surprise, the next morning, one of the judges who had disputed Chambers' decision asked him to participate in the first all-American wine competition in New York City. "Twenty-three at the time, I had never been east of Idaho," Chambers says gleefully.

**Chambers spent the next eight years on what he calls, "the sniff, snort, and spit circuit,"** tasting legendary wines and hobnobbing with celebrated writers and winemakers nationwide. One of the most memorable wines he tasted: A 1961 Chateau d'Yquem, considered one the greatest Sauternes. This French dessert wine is a medley of three grapes, raised by the benevolent fungus, *Botrytis cinerea*, also known as noble rot.

"I'll never forget it," Chambers croons. "I used to take copious notes every time I tasted. This one simply read: There are wines, then there is d'Yquem. Then I sat there, enthralled."

Then, in 1989, Chambers shifted to the production side of wine making, joining Chateau Benoit in the Willamette Valley as Director of Marketing. As part of his job, Chambers managed grape contracts, which is how he found his present vineyard in August of that year. “I visited here and I fell in love with the place,” he says. “I thought it was magical.” Chambers casually mentioned to the owner that he’d love to have the property should he ever decide to sell. The owner called him just four months later.

**During the summer of 1990, the Chambers family moved from Eugene to the southern Willamette Valley,** and everyone took on the task of learning to drive a tractor and farm their land. “I’ve taught myself all about viticulture, soil science, and soil microbiology,” says Chambers. “When I want to know something, I get obsessive about it.” Through his research, Chambers learned about biodynamic wine making and decided to try his hand at it. “When I was a young man,” he says, “I played the bassoon because everyone else played the clarinet. It’s part of my moniker, subvert the dominant paradigm, break the rules.”

Chambers views the philosophy and practices intuited in 1924 by the founder of biodynamic agriculture, **Rudolf Steiner**, as a guide. In the last chapter of his lectures, Steiner emphasizes that biodynamic practices aren’t the final answer. “Take this information and play with it. Experiment. Push the envelope,” is how Chambers interprets his mentor’s words on the subject.

Today, Resonance is one of 40 certified biodynamic vineyards in the United States. In addition to meeting all the standards of organic farming, Chambers is required to employ additional agricultural methods that include botanical teas, compost preparations, and following an astrological calendar to determine times for planting, spraying, and harvesting.

**The canines stretch and rise as we stride atop a gentle slope** to Resonance Vineyard’s youthful block, a mix of two Pinot Noir clones, Wadensvil and Pommard, that were planted on seven acres in 2006 and will be picked for the first time this fall. Chambers sweeps one arm to his left, orchestrating the trees, and notes, “A lot of our brush here is wild cherries—see that red peaking through?”

**Countless Oregon farms, including Resonance, have transitioned from fruit orchards, hazelnut farms, or wildly rampant blackberry briars into vineyard rows.** Some believe wild briar and pear essence lingers in the aromatics and taste of the wines. “I love this notion Matt Kramer [wine writer] has of somewhere-ness to describe *terroir*,” says Chambers. *Terroir* is a French term constituting a taste of place. “I really do believe that at the pinnacle of wine making, we achieve an expression of place.”

Chambers waves to the sky as we walk on, rocky dirt crumbling beneath our feet, crossing the ancient Yamhill and Willakenzie soil, to a block of older vines. “This block was planted in 1987,” he says. “It’s 21 years old and a pure block of the original Wadensvil Pinot Noir rootstock, coveted and rare.”

Pointing ahead, Chambers notes a radionic tower and then we step toward a barrel compost, which provides (along with three other barrels) the only fertilizer used at Resonance. Chambers kneels on a grassy patch, lifting a board off the top, as the hounds and I crowd around neatly circled light gray bricks, framing a beautiful pile of deep, dark compost. “Basically, a mixture of cow manure from the cows you saw at the bottom of the hill, with nettle, horsetail, and egg shells,” he explains. (The other compost barrels hold preparations containing different medicinal plants: yarrow, chamomile, and dandelion, to comply with biodynamic practices.) After it’s decomposed for a year, the compost is spread under the vines, building structure and microbial activity in the soil.

We then weave through old vine pommard, planted in 1981, which is gnarled and twisted like coastal cypress trees bent to the wind. The grape leaves arch and tilt toward the sunlight, slow dancing to warm rays. The perfume of a grape vine captivates—it’s subtle and mysterious, yet intoxicatingly seductive.

“Stick your nose in a blossom and breathe deeply,” Chambers suggests. “Can you smell it? I’ve always struggled to describe the perfume of the grape vine: spicy, sweet—obviously, it’s floral.” After a few moments of silence, he continues: “It smells like a sultan’s princess.”

**We stand at the western part of the vineyard, immersed in the oldest block, 27 years deep**—the same vines that entranced Chambers during his first visit 19 years ago. What we’re looking at is old vine Gewurztraminer, with trunks so knurly, you can’t resist lightly tracing wood to tangled tendrils, aware of time. “These certainly have personality,” states Chambers.

While Resonance fruit has filled wine bottles for years, in 2006, Chambers took the leap into vintage wine making. True to his adventurous and cutting-edge spirit, he decided to co-ferment his old-vine Gewurztraminer with his Pinot Noir Clusters at the **Carlton Winemakers Studio**, which opened its doors with the explicit goal of providing a creative, state-of-the-art facility for artisan producers crafting boutique wines (it was also the first winery registered with the **U.S. Green Building Council**).

When fellow vintners at the studio saw what Chambers was doing, they were sure it was a mistake and shouted to stop the sorting table before his clusters married. Chambers quickly assured them that that was, indeed, what

he wanted to do. “Are you sure about that?” they asked incredulously. “No,” he calmly replied. “Are we ever certain about anything?”

And it is precisely this ability to forge ahead with a kind of uncertainty that has enabled Chambers to successfully navigate such an uncertain path.

*Beguiled by grape vines, **Kerry Newberry** writes about wine and food for regional publications. She swirls, sips and lives in Portland, Oregon.*

## **Wine Tasting**

We live in the perfect place to indulge and explore the nuances of wine. First stop, your local wine shop. That’s what David Dowler did when he befriended wine merchant John Kennedy of **Great Wine Buys**.

Dowler’s wine-loving cadre of friends meets once a month at the wine shop. Kennedy and Dowler cruise the walls of wine together, deep in discourse before each tasting, selecting bottles and a theme. Tasting nights vary from Passion for Pinot to Zealous for Zinfandel. Friends bring dishes for pairing—meats and barbecue sauce for the Zins, braised lamb for the Pinots.

The front of the shop hums minutes before each tasting: sparkling glassware, baskets of bread, piles of corks, bottles bagged and numbered. After Dowler shares history of the varietal and place, conversation bustles, noses dive into glasses, wine swirls, and pencils scrawl. Tasters score each wine, then discuss. Invariably exclamations of surprise and delight follow as each bottle is unveiled one by one.

**Murray Koodish, a resident denizen of Great Wine Buys, offers three tips for taking up tasting:**

1. Dive in. Be curious. Taste to travel and explore unusual regions and varietals—take a side trip to Sicily or Slovenia through wine.
2. Dish and sip by season. Wine and food pair perfectly, seasonally. In autumn, go local with an Oregon Pinot Noir; for winter holidays, savor sparkling.
3. Delegate a doyen. Find that friend, the one who alphabetizes their spice rack, and recruit. Each tasting group needs someone to take charge.

End