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A Jug of Wine ... and Thou

Making your own wine isn't just a romantic notion. With a little training and the right ingredients, you can sip the fruit of your labors

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Five-gallon jugs of wine rest in various stages of fermentation from left: Linden flower, blackberry, linden flower, linden flower and rosehip mead.

Jim Craven

PREMIUM CONTENT

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August 22, 2007

By **John Darling**
for the Mail Tribune

For an unusual drinking sensation and to possibly even reap the health benefits of botanicals and fruits, make your own wine from blackberries, dandelions, herbs and countless other wild plants.

Just add yeast, sugar, some knowledge and labor.

The reward is inexpensive wine, lovingly harvested, made and watched over. Sipped six months to a year later with family, friends and stories, the wine contains a year's memories and makes a perfect gift.

Abundant and delicious, blackberries are the easiest entry point for a new winemaker, said Carla David of Ashland, who has been making "wildcrafted" wines from fruits and plants for six years. She teaches classes in winemaking at Bellvue Grange.

Also called "country wines" or fruit wines, these libations — like grape wine — are deeply rooted in history. Yet fruit wines are harder to make because the quantities of sugar, acid and tannin (the compound that lends astringent or bitter flavors) are less than in grape wines, yielding an unfamiliar taste, David said. Herbal wines take a bit of training the palate.

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Add water, yeast, nutrient for the yeast, pectic enzyme, sugar and, finally, time. The yeast eats the sugar and turns it into alcohol while the complex flavors mature and blend together. In the process, you learn to manipulate the ingredients and timing, producing the desired result.

Sipping her blackberry vintage from last fall, David called it "dry with slight tartness on the finish, fruity, well-balanced."

Her elderberry wine is "semi-sweet, bold, with a hint of clove and cinnamon."

An herbalist, photographer and former landscaper, David caught the winemaking bug, gradually dropped other work and amassed skills in her new art. She was soon pushing Oregon's legal limit of 200 homemade gallons a year.

David recently received her winemaking license from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission and set up a back room of her home with winemaking tools.

Her label, Wild Wines, hit the shelves of Ashland Food Cooperative this month, selling for \$21.95 per bottle. At shows and festivals, like the Sept. 8 Talent Harvest Festival, David plans to sell her organic wine for \$20 a bottle.

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Wines like David's can be made from rose hips, hawthorn berries, linden flowers, lemon balm, ginger, Oregon grape, elder flowers, pears and other fruits. Many of these are medicinal herbs and, in wines, she said, they retain their healthful properties.

Federal law, however, prohibits health claims for non-drugs. Agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms edited David's Web site, www.enjoywildwines.com, pruning out any such language, she noted.

Equal with the "alchemy" of making wines and the pleasure of drinking them, David said, is the joy of being out in nature, finding and gathering the raw materials. Elderberries grow near Pilot Rock, in the Greensprings area and around Hyatt Lake. Dandelions can be plucked from the soil between crop rows in Williams. Blackberries are everywhere.

"I feel whole, being out there with the plants that will go into my wines, hearing the birds sing," David said.

"It's my special place. I make craft wines from hand-harvested ingredients, with no machines," she said, adding that many people, on seeing the wines, will exclaim it's what their grandmothers used to make.

John Darling is a freelance writer living in Ashland. E-mail him at jdarling@jeffnet.org.

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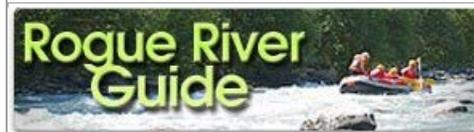
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