



BECKHAM ESTATE: CONNECTION THROUGH CLAY

Inspired by natural winemaking traditions in Italy, Oregon's Andrew Beckham is producing wines of terroir in terra-cotta vessels that he handcrafts himself and is also selling to other winemakers, as Treve Ring explains

Andrew and Annedria founded Beckham Estate Vineyard in 2005 as a family project that was to grow along with their young children. Then, as now, Andrew is employed full time as a ceramics teacher at the local high school, where he is currently in his 15th year of teaching. When they purchased the forested property, the plan was to build an art studio for Andrew, a skilled ceramicist. By the end of May 2005, they had already begun planting. Winemaking had been an interest of Andrew's for some time; he volunteered with local vineyard workers and apprenticed with winemakers to learn as much as he could around his teaching schedule. Their estate vineyard was a long-term project and the one in which Andrew planned to plant his two passions to create a new way of looking at the earth—and at wine.

Up a forested, winding road in the northern Willamette Valley you'll reach their home property, southeast of Parrett Mountain and within the Chehalem Mountains AVA. The sloping site is rich with rocky volcanic Jory and Saum soils over fractured basalt. They decided to plant their vineyard between 400 and 600ft (120–180m), taking advantage of the south, southeast, and southwest aspect, as well as the fresh winds to cleanse the eventually organic, dry-farmed vineyard. With cuttings of Pommard, Wadenswil, and Dijon 115 Pinot Noir clones from nearby vineyards, they cultivated the new plantings late into the evening while laying out the rows and drilling holes for vines during weekends and holidays—all while working day jobs.

After their first 2.25 acres (ha) of newly rooted vines were planted to Pinot Noir, they gradually started planting more as time and funds allowed. After their daughter Sophia Marie was born, so was another acre (0.4ha) of Dijon 115 and half acre of Pommard. In 2008, after their second child, Olivia Anne, came another 1.5 acres of Dijon 777. In the spring of 2013 they added 1 acre of Riesling on the estate's steepest, rockiest slope. Today they have 14 acres (5.5ha) under vine, with 5.5 acres (2.25ha) dedicated to Pinot Noir, 1 to Riesling, and 8 acres (3.2ha) of rootstock to chip-graft over the next year. Some Trousseau

Noir went into the ground this spring, and Savagnin and Sauvignon Blanc are to be added next, along with some Italian varieties, still unnamed. In 2016, they produced 2,400 cases, and 2,800 cases are projected for 2017. They produce two lines of wines, the Beckham Estate Wines, and the groundbreaking Amphora Project wines.

The art of ceramics, the craft of growing

When you ask Andrew about his winemaking inspiration, he's quick to name Italy's Elisabetta Foradori, leading natural winemaker of Trentino. Beckham Estate's RD Amphorae Project was inspired by her use of the vessels and led Andrew to begin experimenting with fermenting wine in amphora in 2013. "I read about Foradori's wines in a magazine and thought, 'Hey, I could do that,'" he remembers. It took many attempts and consultations with a chemist to develop a terra-cotta clay body that would work for making and storing wine. Andrew wanted a vessel porous enough to allow for oxygen transfer, strong enough to house the liquid without seepage, and as inert as possible so as not to affect the finished wine. "The parent material comes from the Sacramento delta in California," he explains. "It is the closest viable material we have found to work with, but there is likely some clay in southern Oregon that may work as well. The clay body is a custom blend that has been developed to be food safe. I have developed a body now that is very neutral."

He began making a series of small 1-liter vessels of varying shapes, fired to a multitude of different temperatures. "The firing temperature is hyper-critical," according to Andrew. "Fired too hot, the vessel becomes non-porous or vitrified and can even melt down. Fired a few degrees centigrade too cool, the vessel will leak. It has taken many years and multiple failures to discover the sweet spot for the firing temperature."

Constructing amphorae that had enough volume to make a quantity of wine that would work commercially was his next challenge. "The first vessels I constructed were about 225 liters. When filled and then pressed, that volume did not work with other common volumes in the winery. The next set of vessels I

constructed were in the 350-liter range. When pressed, those yield about 225 liters of wine, the equivalent of a barrel. Scaling the amphorae beyond the 350-liter range required the development of some very specialized equipment including a super-powerful potter's wheel and a massive custom-constructed kiln." Over the past two years, the Beckhams have constructed a new purpose-built 3,000-sq-ft (280-sq-m) production facility on the estate, overlooking the vineyards. "I have a very large shuttle kiln and a bell kiln that can accommodate vessels up to 1,000 liters. The vessels weigh over 1,000lb [454kg] when wet, and they are moved around with an aerial crane and a forklift."

Each amphora takes about three weeks to construct, with the largest vessels consuming approximately 900lb (410kg) of clay. They need two to three months to dry and require a 60-hour firing in the custom kilns. Moving the filled vessel isn't the easiest maneuver, but Andrew devised the amphorae to be anchored to pallets, allowing them to be shifted around the winery and tipped for pressing with a pallet jack or forklift.

Today Andrew is working with four different shapes in two different volumes: 250 liters and 500 liters. He's continually trialing various shapes and volumes to accomplish different results in the completed wines.

"I am very interested in shape as it relates to intention and outcome. I am using amphora with a very conical bottom for long macerations. The pips and skins stratify and make their way to the bottom of the cone, where the overall extractable surface area is much more limited than in a broad bottom vessel. I am using a *qevri* for red ferments because of their shape and because of the large opening that allows for better evacuation of must. I am using *tinaja*, or jars, for aging wines because they have a much smaller opening. I am making eggs for fermenting pressed juice. The eggs have a tendency to keep the fermenting juice in a constant state of turbidity due to kinetics. As the cap reaches the top of the vessel when fermenting, it is forced over and on itself because of the tapered shoulder."

The difference in ferments in terra-cotta for their AD Beckham wines, versus in wood for their Beckham Estate wines, is dramatic according to Andrew. "The amphora are such marvelous insulators. If we can get fruit into them while the fruit's cold, they maintain temperature like our other vessels won't. We see in the amphora a very long, cool, protracted fermentation that will typically take 30 days to ferment in clay, with peak temperatures at 20–22°C [68–72°F], versus 30°C [86°F] over 10 or 11 days in a conventional 2-ton vessel. At the conclusion of primary fermentation, we see wine that is so different. The stuff coming from clay is very bright and high-toned; and as we move into the darker spectrum, the stuff that macerated at higher temperature in wood or stainless, we see very different fruit character."

He's also found that working with clay allows him other unexpected and positive outcomes, resulting in fewer inputs into the wine. "In my experience, the wines I have aged in terra-cotta—because of its negative charge—have a great clarity. The clay body acts as a fining agent would, binding proteins. The porous nature of the vessel seems to enhance the potential for tartrate precipitation."

The lining of the vessel has also been a series of trial and error, occasionally with disastrous results. "My preference is vessels that are unlined; however, I have experimented with



both soy and beeswax," reflects Andrew. "The ones we lined with soy—it's a train wreck. Its aromatics and flavor, I can't get past it. I sold off a lot of wine last year that I probably should have kept, but I just couldn't put it out there."

Sometimes he has filled the waxed vessels a few times before their final intended use. "The waxed vessels take multiple uses before they do not impart a flavor or feel in the mouth. After a couple of fills, they are quite neutral and are easier to clean, but I much prefer the purity of the wines coming from the unlined vessels. Because I have large kilns, I can sterilize a vessel if it has been exposed to Brett or has developed VA by putting the vessels back into the kiln and heating to the point of sterility. Wax can be applied to a previously unlined vessel by heating it, and the wax. Additionally, a waxed vessel could be heated to burn the wax from the vessel."

Aging wines in the vessels has also yielded some very interesting results. Andrew and Annedria taste constantly across their Amphora Project wines and their Beckham Estate wines. As Andrew explains, "When we taste the amphora wines in the cellar, and then we move to something in ten-year-old wood, for me all I taste is wood, even though it's very neutral. It's a mouthfeel, a sweetness, and that's one of the things about the amphora that's so appealing to me: the purity. We've removed wood tannin, but there's something coming from the clay. I think, that's interesting in the mouth. There is a common textural component that I would liken to dusty brick. I pick up this iron-driven earth tone regardless of varietal." According to Annedria, it's the purest form of the wine. "I feel like the word 'minerality' gets thrown around so frequently, but for me it's applicable here because it's being fermented and/or aged in the earth. It's like putting your tongue on a wet rock. There's a mouthfeel that comes from the clay that is quite unique and intriguing. And there is a chalky component to the texture that is unique."

They're seeing results not just in taste, but chemically as well. Andrew notes, "In clay, I'm seeing wines with great clarity, that have a great sense of stabilization. When we're looking at dissolved oxygen, we're about twice what we are in wood, in clay, at the same duration of time, so the dissolved oxygen is twofold in clay compared to wood." The difference has resulted in the bottling dates between the wood-matured wines and amphora-matured wines being approximately seven or eight months apart. "The wines that were aging in clay seem to be maturing at an accelerated rate."



While all their wines are farmed organically (and working toward biodynamically), without irrigation and fermented wild, the AD Beckham Amphora wines are without any other inputs, and are unfinned and unfiltered. When they started the project in 2013, they didn't know what to expect, so they took a very small amount for fermentation only and produced just 24 cases, which quickly sold out. In 2014, they produced 450 cases of amphora-fermented and aged wines. According to Annedria, it proved they were on the right path. "Because the project received so much attention before there was actually any wine to share with people, we knew we had to lead and push forward. Everybody was interested in the fact that there was amphora [wine] being made in the United States; there wasn't much at all in the country at the time, and the fact that Andrew was making them drew a lot of attention, but unfortunately there was nothing really to show."

Their new custom-built facility will allow not only for moderately increased production ("We want comfortable, sustainable growth," notes Annedria) but also for the commercial sale of the vessels as well. "I have the capacity to make a couple hundred vessels a year now," calculates Andrew.

Opposite: Andrew and Annedria Beckham amid their vines, now totaling 14 acres. Above: Some of the large terra-cotta amphorae that Andrew crafts in his new studio.

"The studio was purpose-built to allow for the construction of these monumental vessels." He is currently selling lidded 250-liter and 500-liter vessels, at \$2,800 and \$4,800 respectively, undercutting the price that the imported Tuscan vessels are selling for in the United States. Future plans include a 1,000-liter vessel, as well as the evolution of 250-liter terra-cotta eggs that sit on their sides, like a barrel. Spoken like a true artist, there is no end to Andrew's creative mind. "I have made and am developing a commercial *tinaja*, an egg, a classic conical-bottomed amphora... I have been making some 20- and 26-liter amphorae to age cocktails, like negronis. I am also developing terra-cotta vessels for brewers to use in making beer; they are 250 and 500 liters." They're finding other producers are as keen on the idea as they are. They are currently selling the vessels only via word of mouth and have received interest from producers in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Thanks to distribution in New York, Washington, Oregon, Italy, and the UK, a fervent fan base of natural-wine lovers (the wines are always a hit at London's Real Wine Fair), and a growing interest in amphora-curious producers, the Beckhams don't see things quieting down any time soon. And that's just how this busy family envisioned it: a vibrant, sustainable home for raising a family—and raising compelling wines as well.

TASTING

I tasted through a selection of newly released wines in spring 2017.

Beckham Estate Vineyard 2016 Olivia's Pinot Noir Rosé, AVA Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, USA (\$22)

Named for the Beckhams' youngest daughter, this is from four clones of organic, dry-farmed Pinot Noir (Pommard, Wädenswil, Dijon 115, and Dijon 777) from the rocky, volcanic soils of their Chehalem Mountain estate vineyard. Lively and bright, this pale, dry rosé rings with wild strawberry, delicate ripe cherry, and whiffs of raspberry, on a bed of firm, stony spice. The light/medium palate glides with a cushion of lees, before a lingering, spicy finish. Effortless finesse and poise. Bonus: It also is bottled in magnum.

Beckham Estate Vineyard 2014 Pinot Noir, AVA Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, USA (\$30)

Organic, dry-farmed on volcanic Jory and Saum soils, this vintage of Estate Pinot Noir is four clones of Pinot Noir (Pommard, Wädenswil, Dijon, 115, and Dijon 777). Wild-yeast fermented and 35 percent whole cluster, this was aged in French oak for 15 months, ten percent of which is new. Perfumed black raspberry, sun-ripened strawberry, forest berries, and smoked pepper is housed with fine, firm tannins on a medium-bodied palate. There's a lovely approachability to this serious wine, making it highly accessible and drinkable now.

Beckham Estate Vineyard 2015 Sophia's Pinot Noir, AVA Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, USA (\$40)

Named for their eldest daughter, this organic, dry-farmed Pinot Noir is solely own-rooted Dijon 115 from the Beckhams' Jory-soiled estate vineyard. Fermented wild, with 25 percent whole cluster, this spent 15 months in French oak, ten percent of which was new. A darker, deeper shade of Pinot by comparison with their estate Pinot (which is a blend of four clones), this streams black raspberry, perfumed dark cherry, and a lick of black licorice along finely grippy, firm tannins, with a stony spice woven through to a salty finish. Structural, while still being light and finessed, this is impressive now and will impress even more with a few years in the cellar.

AD Beckham MMXVI Amphora Vermentino, AVA Applegate Valley, Oregon, USA (\$23)

From Full Quiver Vineyard in southern Oregon's Applegate Valley, this Vermentino was transformed through fermentation and time spent in Andrew Beckham's hand-crafted and kilned amphorae. The Vermentino is the newest in the AD portfolio. This was wild-fermented and aged in his terra-cotta vessels for ten weeks before a



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tightening stint in stainless for six weeks prior to being bottled unfinned and unfiltered. Lightly grippy, with orange oil, bergamot blossom, pear skin, Asian pear, pine nuts, and brisk green-apple acidity, this alluring white is lighter in body but weighted with texture and gravitas. Only 65 cases.

AD Beckham MMXV Amphora Pinot Gris, AVA Willamette Valley, Oregon, USA (\$38)

This single-vineyard Pinot Gris was skin-fermented and partially aged in Andrew's handcrafted amphorae. The remaining 50 percent was aged in French acacia barrels, before all was blended and bottled unfinned and unfiltered. A turbid deep russet pink/peach in hue, with grippy peach fuzz, broken stones, scented wild flowers, and herbal scrub. Buoyant acidity is perfectly pitched to carry the intensity of this natural wine, leaving just a riff of pithy grip on the lingering finish. This is not about fruit, and alluringly so. Enjoy over many hours as this is continually evolving in the glass. Impressive natural beauty.

AD Beckham MMXV Amphora Grenache, AVA Rogue Valley, Oregon, USA (\$40)

This Grenache was sourced from Southern Oregon's Rogue Valley and was wild-fermented in Andrew's amphorae, with half aged in his vessels and the remainder in ten-year-old barrel. Bottled unfinned and unfiltered, this throws a slightly cloudy hue. Sun-ripened sweet strawberry, cherry jam, and raspberry are lifted with a bright swell of acidity and lined with a very fine slick of thorny

resin and dusty stone. A subtle grippiness to the tannins hint to the use of amphorae, a welcome temperance to Grenache's natural abundance.

AD Beckham MMXV Lignum Amphora Pinot Noir, AVA Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, USA (\$45)

Lignum is Latin for wood, signaling that even though this AD Beckham wine was fermented in Andrew Beckham's handmade amphorae, it was finished in old French oak barrels. (If you want to try the amphora-fermented wine that was aged in amphorae, look for the Creta Pinot Noir.) You can see it on the label; the Lignum has a half-amphora outline, while the Creta shows a full amphora. In comparison, this is softer on the palate than the bristling Creta. Wild-fermented, dry- and organically farmed, this was 25 percent whole-cluster and four clones of Pinot (Pommard, Wädenswil, Dijon 115, and Dijon 777) bottled unfinned and unfiltered. Dusky cherry, subtle blackcurrant, plum, subtle resin, with a dusky shadow of sticky tannins. Acidity is brisk and helpful to lift the medium body to a lingering, salted finish.

AD Beckham MMXV Creta Amphora Pinot Noir, AVA Chehalem Mountains, Oregon, USA (\$55)

Creta is Latin for clay, signaling that this AD Beckham wine was fermented and aged in Andrew Beckham's handmade amphorae. (If you want to try the amphora-fermented/wood-aged wine, look for the Lignum Pinot Noir.) You can see it on the label; the Lignum has a half-amphora outline, while the Creta shows a full amphora. Dry- and organically farmed, this is estate-grown Pommard, Wädenswil, Dijon 115, and Dijon 777, fermented wild and with 30 percent whole-cluster, bottled unfinned and unfiltered. Dried cherry, black plum, wild cassia, and thorns are textured with abundant iron and graphite. Tannins are finely grippy, and acidity is lifted and effortless, brightening the medium body. Bottled unfinned and unfiltered, this lingers long in the mouth and memory. A stunner.