

Food & Lifestyle

PBJ Executives of the Year 2018: Ryan Harms of Union Wine Co. 🔑



Ryan Harms and Union Wine are becoming solidly entrenched among the state's big spirits names.

DAVID L. REAMER

It's the rare individual who can be credited with opening up a big new avenue of growth for a mature industry. But [Ryan Harms](#) – founder, owner and winemaker at Union Wine Company in Tualatin – fits the bill.

Harms didn't invent the idea of putting fine wine in cans, but with Union's Underwood brand, he did it in a fresh way and took it to unimagined levels.

“Union was the first (or the first with real distribution) to put high-quality wines in cans, position it that way (not just as a novelty) and make a serious effort,” [Christian Miller](#), proprietor of the industry analysis firm Full Glass Research, told the Business Journal.

The wine industry noticed, and in 2018 everyone jumped on the bandwagon, with some 500 brands now in cans.

“People thought it would fade away, but it’s here to stay, and it’s growing at a phenomenal rate,” said [Liz Thach](#), a wine business professor at Sonoma State University and market researcher.

That means ever-growing acceptance of wine in cans by consumers, a good thing for Union; but it also means more competition.

Harms sees the can half full, and it’s easy to see why, given Union’s history of fast-paced growth. From a startup putting out a few thousand cases of wine in 2005, it ballooned to produce around 500,000 cases in 2018. That put it at or near the top of the heap in volume terms among Oregon wineries.

And about half of those 500,000 cases of wine were in cans, not bottles.

“We know that with the base getting bigger, the percentage growth is going to have to keep coming down a little bit,” Harms said. “But we continue to be very bullish on the opportunities – especially for the Underwood brand – for us in the market.”

He put his money behind that belief last year, expanding winemaking capacity by about 50 percent, pushing it to 1 million gallons.

Union also invested more than \$3.2 million into outfitting a highly automated bottling and canning facility in an office park a few miles away from their Tualatin winery.

But beefing up the production facilities wasn’t just about getting bigger, Harms said; it also was vital to maintaining quality.

A to Z Wineworks is a competitor that, like Union, has reached for a broader consumer market than many Oregon boutique wineries. Co-founder and winemaker Sam Tannahill is an admirer of Harms’ work.

“Ryan’s been ambitious, in a good way, and established Union as a pioneer,” he said. “Ultimately, he’s putting more Oregon wine in more palates, and I’m all for that.”

With investors from California – and elsewhere – sniffing around Oregon wine country these days, one question might be whether Harms and his powerful brand could be enticed by an offer. So far, he hasn't taken outside money, relying on cash flow, deft management of resources, and a good relationship with his bank to grow.

At this point at least, the answer is no.

“I don't feel like we're top ticking in any regard,” Harms said. “My perspective is there's still a lot we can do.”

Ryan Harms

Title: Founder and owner

Company: Union Wine Company

What the company does: Makes and sells Underwood, Kings Ridge and Alchemist wines

No. of employees: 30

Revenue: Not disclosed