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What started as a marketing gimmick has grown into a huge wine-canning industry for Union Wine Co.

A Can-Do Attitude

Ryan Harms and Union Wine Co. innovate their way to wine fame

interview by Sheila G. Miller

RYAN HARMS FELL in love with winemaking back in 1997 at the tender age of 20, working the harvest at Rex Hill and taking a semester off school to explore the business. "In a very romantic way, I fell in love with wine and the idea of being in the business," he said. Harms envisioned a small vineyard and winery.

Today, as the founder and owner of Union Wine Company, most known for its Underwood label canned wine, he recognizes his life looks a lot different than he intended.

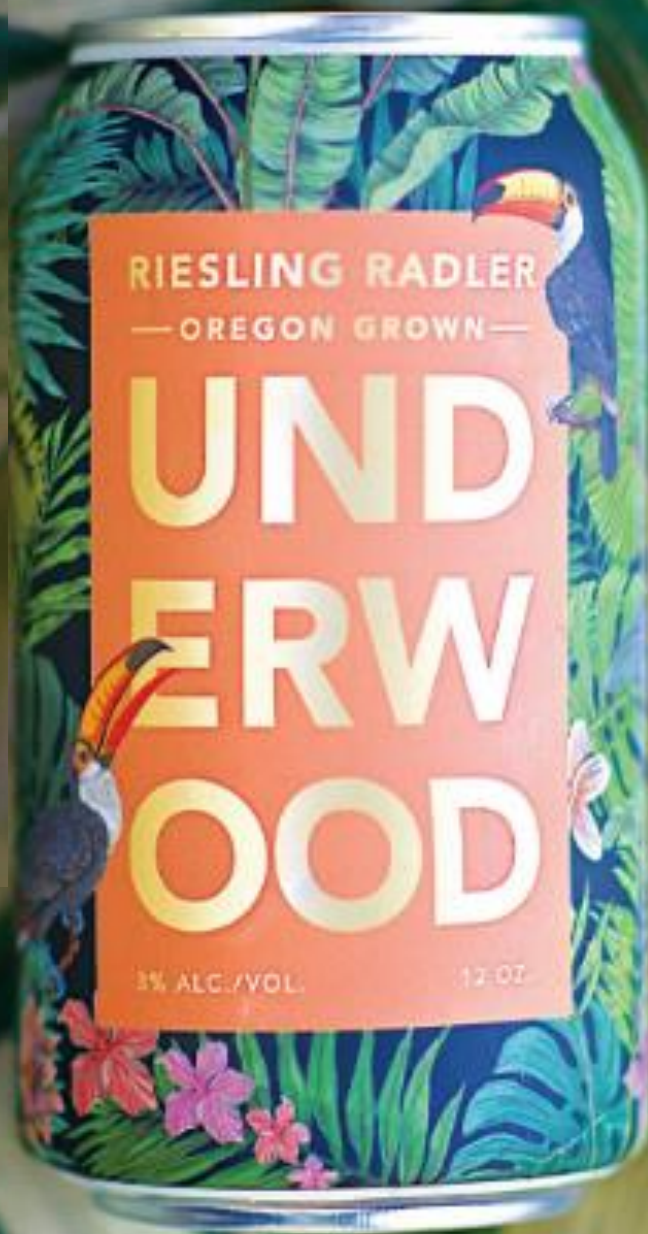
"Upon reflection, this really probably fits me," he said. "I always enjoyed being in situations where people are the underdog. I enjoyed the challenge of doing things people don't think is possible."

Wine in a can is one such thing—an unexpected success that has catapulted this company to new heights.

» **How did you start canning wine?**

Originally we did it as a combination of marketing activation and maybe a way to test an idea and see what the consumer response would be. If we got laughed at by everyone, we figured the worst that would happen is we would have thirty cases of pinot noir and pinot gris to take camping over the next couple years.

We had just launched new branding for Underwood a year prior, and were really just getting our feet under ourselves about how we talked about and marketed our brand. The cans just kind of lit that on fire to a degree. We introduced them at Feast



David L. Harms

Since developing canned wine several years ago, Underwood has added wine coolers as well.

Portland in September 2013, and we went from being in *Fast Company* as an innovation story to a week and a half later Perez Hilton talking about our wine in Hollywood gossip.

» **That must have been a shock.**

It certainly presented a lot of challenges. First and foremost, when we presented the idea in the fall of 2013, we only had access to 12-ounce cans—we were just using them for marketing and that wasn't a package we could legally sell. We had a ton of challenges and hurdles to overcome, all the way down to the pent-up demand and interest we'd created. At one point we had distributors who accused us of playing games with supply and demand.

It was important as we tried to keep up with demand that we continue to work with growers that produce the quality of fruit we were looking for and that we continue to make wines we were proud of. When you're growing so fast, quality sometimes gets compromised in the process.

It's the same wine in the glass bottle that was also going in the cans—it was simply the packages that were different. The growth concern was having new folks enter the canned wine category and ensuring their quality was high—I was concerned that if somebody didn't do a good job and a consumer had that product first, they would then think all canned wine was bad, as opposed to that one wine.

» **Tell us about the new canning facility you recently opened.**

We originally started working with a local company doing mobile canning, so they'd bring the equipment to our facility. We outgrew that pretty quickly, so then we went into a co-packing arrangement in California. That was a good solution for a period, but eventually because of the cost and logistics we decided to invest in our own facility. We came online for



FROM TOP Union Wine Co.'s new canning facility is the fastest and most automated in the state. Ryan Harms is behind the massive growth in the canned wine industry.

bottling in summer 2018, and the canning line came in January 2019.

» **What's next for the company?**

Last year we rolled out some wine coolers in a more limited way, and this year we're expanding their distribution and production. The Riesling Radler and the Strawberry Cooler are now both being canned at the facility.

We are getting ready to have the line set up to also produce the smaller, 250-milliliter cans. Those cans we're primarily interested in using for venues where the venue alcohol policy won't allow the 375ml can. This year, starting in 2019, we're sponsors of the Thorns and Timbers organization, and so we have custom

250ml cans only available in the stadium. We also did some custom 375ml cans for sale in local markets. Just that ability to innovate around packaging, or do limited runs, is a big benefit that gives us control over our own line.

We are also looking at beginning to offer a co-packing service. As we're getting better and becoming experts at packaging, we have extra capacity in our facility. There are a number of other wineries in Oregon and in Washington who are venturing into the canned wine space, and as much as they're our competitors, I think it's also an opportunity to help those folks with our knowledge and experience. ■