

Mimi Casteel, Invitation to join the Willamette Valley Oak Accord  
At the Annual Meeting of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association, February 2017

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about the movement we are now calling the Oak Accord. This movement sprung organically from conversations about the relationship between biodiversity and agriculture. Most if not all of us are familiar with the term biodiversity and have a general sense of its literal meaning, but less of a grip on why, as farmers, winegrowers, and winemakers, we should care.

If someone asked you today why you chose the Willamette Valley as the place where your wines would be born, what would your answer be? What imagery would come into your mind to illustrate your choice? The soils? The climate? The perfectly positioned loping hillsides decorated by a mosaic of plant and animal life?

The Oak Accord was named such because of the way we identify this landscape with the majestic shape of the guardian white oaks that frame the picture in our minds, but the intent behind it is the ecosystems it represents. The oak is the craggy grey architectural bones of this landscape. It plumbs and regulates the flows from our persnickety perched water tables, by putting down one taproot. The rest of its rooty fingers stay within 12-18 inches of the surface, forming mycorrhizal lace mats that corset this landscape, stabilizing our rocky hillsides. But that is just the beginning of the mutualistic relationships of co-evolved species and unique topography that created this place where you / where we put our own roots and hope to make the wine that writes the deepest, richest, and most developed epic poetry of these vistas and coppices.

Words are important. The word system, by definition, is a set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole, in particular

We cannot begin to know the beauty behind the relationships within this system, but we dismiss it to our great peril. What immense and quiet intelligence makes a grey squirrel bite some, but not all acorns to prevent their germination, before scatter hording and burying caches at specific depths where viable acorns can germinate in new territory? Did the vesper sparrow, with its preference for vast and open grassy savannas, help maintain the native cover of grasses and forbs, or did the forbs and grasses and fire regime maintain the conditions required for vesper sparrow and its need for open nest sites? By what communication and wisdom did sweat bees, rove beetles and red worms feed and facilitate the bacterial and fungal armies that broke the great towers of basalt or dissolved again the vast cements of an ancient sea floor?

We won't have answers in our lifetime. But we mustn't forget that mystery in the natural world is *observable magic*.

The push to develop these hillsides will be largely driven by this community. Islands of biodiversity will perish if private, agricultural land won't support them. We hold in our hands

the ability to darn the threads and re-knit the fabric of this valley back together. We can even save our livelihoods in the process.

Haunting and true wines that have the power to awaken dead senses evoke a sense of excitement and secret knowledge - knowledge of a place with beautiful secrets that would otherwise be tethered to the ground, cloistered in the plants, animals and sky. We are the authors of the stories of this place. These stories, your stories, the character development, the nuance of the plot, the nostalgic richness of the language, are a direct reflection of the health, diversity and resilience of this system. By definition, no one part of a system can be removed without consequence. We cannot position ourselves apart from the natural world. Our wines are the words of the land.

We value complexity in wine. Most if not all of us embrace notions of competition and diversity in bringing forth the most compelling expressions of our home. Pathways of energy, access to critical mineral nutrients, all are enhanced when the system is whole, rich and diverse. Our roots need indigenous microbiology to make great wine. Complex mycorrhizal and beneficial bacterial communities develop in complex, whole, rich systems.

Brilliance in wine is comes from the humble recognition of the magnificence of this landscape. It is to compare a wine that tells the story of the gentle drama of this place, a luminous lightness held up by stately and sentinel power to a wine that is *just so many empty pages*. We are beholden to the system we will either save or end. I won't speak of the potential generations of extinct species, children, or any other heart string. Our wines will be our judges.

Until now, we have been making phone calls one at a time. If you have never heard of this, it isn't because we thought you wouldn't care. It is merely a reflection of there only being three of us. We want everyone on board. We want to be the community of land stewards who turns this around. 7% of this habitat remains. We winegrowers occupy critical hot spots of this system, and we also represent threat #1. The metric of sustainability does NOT BEGIN after the last tree has been felled; it is not merely the measure of our post-development inputs. This land is not for making blank canvases on which to paint our own faces. The removal of the last vestiges of this most precious and unique habitat in the name of Oregon viticulture will not arrest climate change or accommodate generations of future winegrowers. We cannot manifest destiny up the mountains to great wine, and may our mouths be struck dumb should we dare use the word sustainability if we do. *This place is not a climate*. It is a community, of all.

Join us today. We have all the supporting literature and information you need, and will sign you up right here, right now. This isn't about tying anyone's hands behind their back. This is about protecting your one irreplaceable asset.