

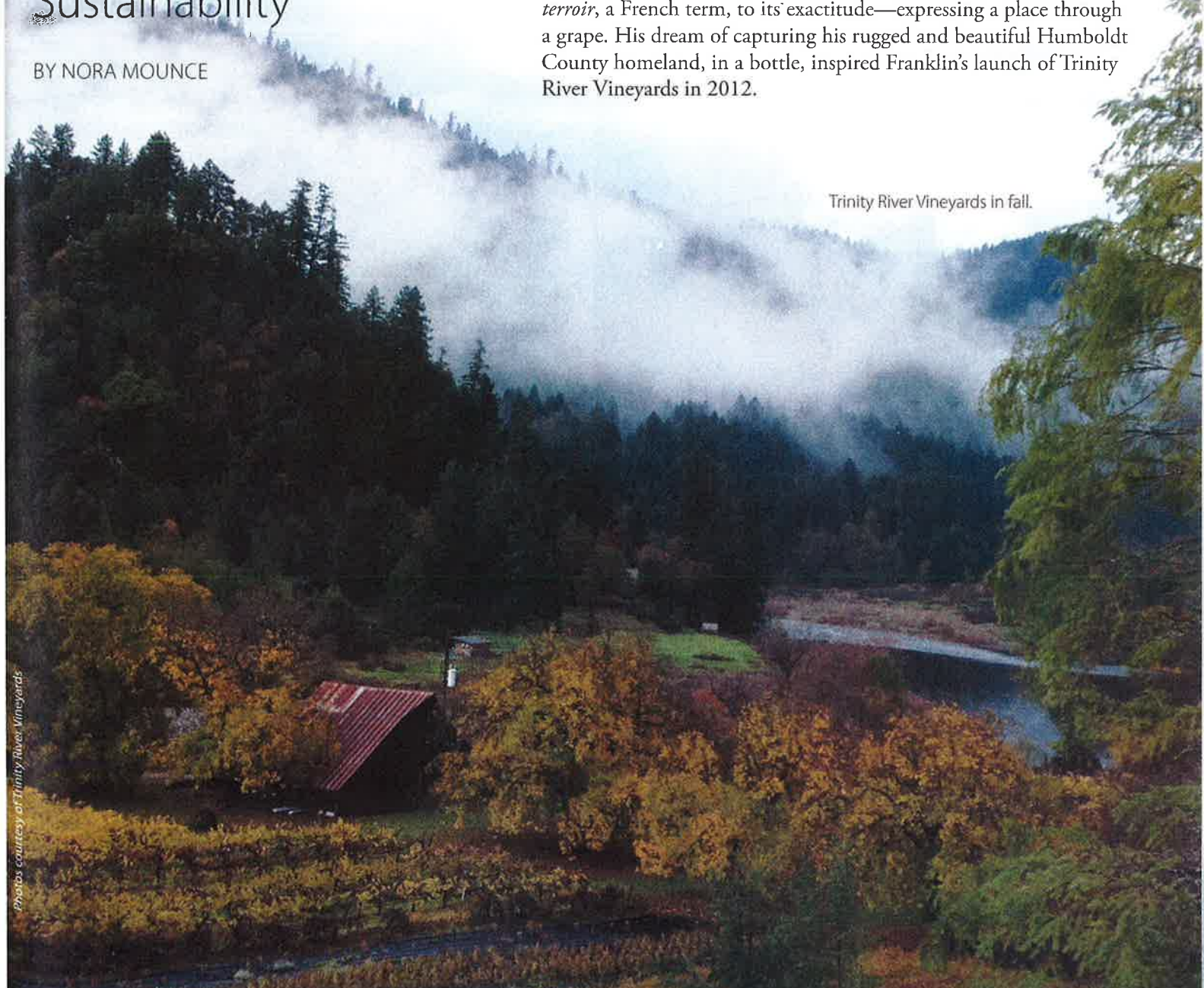
# WINEMAKER BOTTLES WILLOW CREEK

## Wil Franklin on Wine, Weed, and Economic Sustainability

BY NORA MOUNCE

Wilfred Franklin's education as a winemaker began in Humboldt County and continues amidst the rain-soaked vineyards framing the cold waters of the Trinity River. Known to friends as Wil, Franklin grew up in Arcata, California, and attended Humboldt State University. Beneath the redwoods, he met his wife, Liz, and earned a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's in mycology. The pursuit of love and adventure took him south to San Luis Obispo, where the couple quickly snagged jobs making wine in the labs of local wineries. After years of fussing over titrates and monitoring second fermentations, Wil followed Liz to the East Coast where she traded in her rubber winemaker's boots for a career in teaching. Wil, still feverish with the wine bug, continued to quench his thirst for knowledge with a small wine shop and importer in New Jersey. There, he was exposed to some of the world's finest vintners and vintages, inspiring his life-long appreciation for wines that express geographical identity, the very beating heart of *terroir*. A French term associated with equal amounts of pomp and mystique, Wil is quick to strip down *terroir*, a French term, to its exactitude—expressing a place through a grape. His dream of capturing his rugged and beautiful Humboldt County homeland, in a bottle, inspired Franklin's launch of Trinity River Vineyards in 2012.

Trinity River Vineyards in fall.







Sharecropper/vintner Wil Franklin works the vines.

## WINE, WEED, AND WATER

On a January morning wetter than the local surf break, Wil eases his “office,” a white Ford farm truck, along the slick curves of Highway 96. With four successful vintages of Trinity River Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Bordeaux-style red blends under his belt, Franklin now manages nearly a half-dozen vineyards for local grape growers in the Willow Creek American Viticulture Area (AVA). Encompassing mountainous terrain in both Trinity and Humboldt counties, the Willow Creek AVA enjoys historic notoriety. Due to the diligent petitioning of a few visionary farmers, the wine region was established in 1983, long before many of California’s world-famous wine-growing AVAs were granted the same recognition. Yet today, Willow Creek is far better known for outlaw marijuana farmers than winegrowers. Both locals and wine connoisseurs alike are surprised to learn that a small, but stunning, network of vineyards pepper the Trinity River watershed, tucked away between neighboring cannabis farms. This variety in the region’s landscape is part of Franklin’s “vision of agricultural diversification” that he fervently believes will help sustain the struggling economies of Humboldt and Trinity counties.

Wil and Liz returned to Humboldt County looking forward to the better quality of life behind the redwood curtain, a nickname for this hidden pocket of Northern California. Humboldt and Trinity counties are famed for their verdant and forested landscapes, yet sit mere miles from the isolated Pacific coastline. The rural region is rich with recreational opportunities from surfing to rafting to cycling, while offering small town consideration and charm, a great

environment to raise their two young children, Rafaella and Vincent. But the couple was concerned for their financial survival in the region’s infamous boom and bust economy. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the resource-extractive industries of fishing, timber, and cannabis have ravaged the region’s economic fertility. Amidst this dismal financial trajectory, the wine industry has played a minor role in Humboldt and Trinity counties. The bulk of local vinification has been relegated to hobby winemakers, ex-Humboldt State professors and well-endowed cannabis farmers, though each Humboldt and Trinity County is proudly home to a handful of commercial wineries.

Despite the small economy of scale, a legacy for quality had been quietly growing on the steep, green hills of the Willow Creek AVA. In 2012, Franklin joined several wine growing pioneers who had similarly forecast the rich viticulture potential of the region’s most important natural resource—water. In the majority of California’s vineyards, dry farming (indicative of a growing season where irrigation is not utilized) is a niche term, used to describe elite, coastal vineyards. By prohibiting irrigation, vineyards typically produce lower yields, a reliable formula for higher quality fruit and more expressive wines. Given that California’s most sacred resource is water, Humboldt and Trinity County growers understand they’ve been offered a rare opportunity to dry farm in California. The Willow Creek AVA averages nearly 70 inches of rain annually, promising long-term environmental and economic sustainability for the small, but mighty, wine region. Also, the boon of northern California moisture allows grapes to mature as nature intended, with less manmade intervention.



## WINE AND PROP 64

“What I think will emerge is a really unique, boutique, small wine industry,” says Franklin. He explains how the worst attributes of wine growing in Humboldt and Trinity are simultaneously their best. First, the scenic, but mountainous, vineyards overlooking the Trinity River are impossible to machine harvest, which protects the grapes from harsh treatment come harvest time. Hillside vineyards are also good for shedding heat. Despite Humboldt County’s reputation for gray, rainy weather, Willow Creek regularly sees triple digit temperatures in the summer, allowing red-skinned varieties like Cabernet, Merlot, and Syrah to thrive.

Franklin believes that the challenges of grape farming in Willow Creek (isolation, terrain) will protect the wine industry from the intrusion of big corporations. Meanwhile, everyone living in the Emerald Triangle (Humboldt, Mendocino, Trinity) is concerned about the threat of “big ag” for the region’s number one agricultural crop, marijuana. Though its ultimate impact is still to be unveiled, Proposition 64, which passed last November, legalized cannabis cultivation in California. The new legislation is wrought with red tape and ambiguity, but without a doubt, inevitable changes are on the horizon for agriculture in Humboldt and Trinity.

Noting a symbiotic relationship between the wine industry and cannabis farming, Franklin believes Humboldt and Trinity farmers are in a unique position to help one another. By marketing the virtues of the region, Franklin believes that farmers should be able to share the fruits of their labor with wider audiences. “People want to come here for the mystique, the history, the organically grown [farms], the outdoor experience,” says Franklin. Believing that the future of economic sustainability in Humboldt and Trinity counties lies in marketing the region’s rare beauty and agricultural provisions, Franklin sees vast potential in this bedrock of the region’s economy.

## SHARECROPPING GRAPES

Hardly alone in his rosy outlook on agricultural sustainability behind the redwood curtain, Franklin actually got his winemaking start in Humboldt County through a unique partnership with Lane DeVries, the owner of Sun Valley Floral Farms. Located in the coastal cow pastures northwest of Arcata, Sun Valley was established in 1982 and has grown into the nation’s largest cut-flower farm. DeVries, who first immigrated from Holland for a job growing lilies, signed on with Sun Valley after researching Humboldt’s climate. Years later, now at the helm of Sun Valley’s operations, DeVries saw similar potential in Gardner Ranch, an old vineyard outside of Willow Creek. He hired Franklin



EST. 2006

LET'S Go NUTS

CALIFORNIA NUT FESTIVAL

SATURDAY, APRIL 15, 2017

www.californianutfestival.com

Join us 11 am to 4 pm at the  
Historic Patrick Ranch Museum for a  
celebration of local food, wine, brews, art,  
live music on 2 stages, and area agriculture

Buy tickets for \$30 at [www.californianutfestival.com](http://www.californianutfestival.com)  
and Tri Counties Bank locations. \$35 at the event.  
Ride your bike down the Midway bikepath and park  
in our secure bike valet, carpool, or take our shuttle!

SPONSORED BY:

tri counties bank  
Service With Solutions™

Meadow Brook RANCH  
also.co.org/home.com

CALIFORNIA OLIVE RANCH

C.F. KOEHNEN  
1903

Pacific Gas and Electric Company

Like us on Facebook  
[facebook.com/nutfestival](https://www.facebook.com/nutfestival)

BUTTE AGRICULTURE FOUNDATION INC.

The California Nut Festival is a program of the Butte Agriculture Foundation, a 501(c)3 organization.



to manage the vineyard, originally planted in the 1960s, and the two farmers created a new Humboldt County wine label, Stargazer Barns. Its portfolio of whites, reds and blends is sold across the country in cheerful “Humboldt Made” gift baskets, featuring Sun Valley flowers, wine and an assortment of local chocolates, jams, and cheese—essentially, the bounty of Humboldt County agriculture.

Franklin could have hardly known that by agreeing to farm grapes at Gardner Ranch, he was judiciously fertilizing his dream of making Humboldt County wine. Before long, other Willow Creek farmers were calling on Franklin’s viticulture background, and he quickly developed a reputation as skillful, hardworking winegrower. Referring to himself as a sharecropper, today Franklin manages four different vineyard sites around Willow Creek. After signing a contract with each property owner, Franklin trades his labor and knowledge for half the grapes of each harvest. He takes full advantage of the opportunity to gauge local soil content and determine where particular grape varieties perform best: Franklin is building a bed of knowledge about the various microclimates in the Willow Creek AVA. This includes trial and error with vineyard management tactics, so that every one of the vineyards he manages bears organically grown grapes. A black and white issue for him, Franklin believes, “If you can’t grow it organic, you shouldn’t be growing it.” Franklin avoids using pesticides and anti-fungal sprays by working with the unique soil content, elevation, and canopy of each vineyard, no small feat in a region with such wet winters.

## GOOD GRAPES, GOOD WINE

“You can’t make good wine without good grapes. Done. Boom. End of story,” says Franklin. Of the many hats he wears as the owner of Trinity River Vineyards, Franklin views himself, first and foremost, as a farmer. With an unwavering commitment to growing premium, organic grapes in Willow Creek, he seeks to put Humboldt County wines on the map

for wine drinkers across the country. Since his first vintage release in 2012, Trinity River Vineyards wines have grown more sophisticated and expressive. Not one to indulge in the winemaker’s sleight of hand, Franklin preaches the virtue of producing clean wines, aged with minimal oak, and as little “massaging” as possible. By farming all his own fruit, Franklin starts the winemaking process in the vineyard, choosing to harvest a particular block of Syrah early or co-fermenting his Sauvignon Blanc with clusters of aromatic Semillon. The 2015 Trinity River Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc was recently awarded Double Gold in the *San Francisco Chronicle* wine competition, a benchmark for quality, and a nod to Franklin that he’s on the right path.

As the weak, late winter sunlight disappears in Willow Creek, Franklin points his farm truck west toward to the Pacific Ocean. Driving through redwoods, he lumbers up Berry Summit and descends into the foggy, coastal town of McKinleyville, where he and Liz make their home. Franklin wants to impart many things to his children—an appreciation for the outdoors, a value in education, and the story of Humboldt, their homeland, famed for its independence and beauty. As a father, a winemaker and a farmer, Franklin seeks to tell that story, preserving life behind the redwood curtain in each bottle of Trinity River Vineyards wine. 🌿

*Trinity River Vineyards wines are available at fine grocers and restaurants throughout the North Coast. For more information, visit [trinityrivervineyards.com](http://trinityrivervineyards.com).*

---

Nora Mounce writes about local farms and food, rivers and redwoods, and strengths of the community in order to preserve the beauty of Humboldt County. She also runs a vacation rental in her Victorian home in Eureka, California. Her perfect day includes a run in the redwoods, antique shopping with friends, and making a pot of homemade soup for dinner.

The rainbow arcs over Gardner Ranch, an old vineyard outside of Willow Creek.

