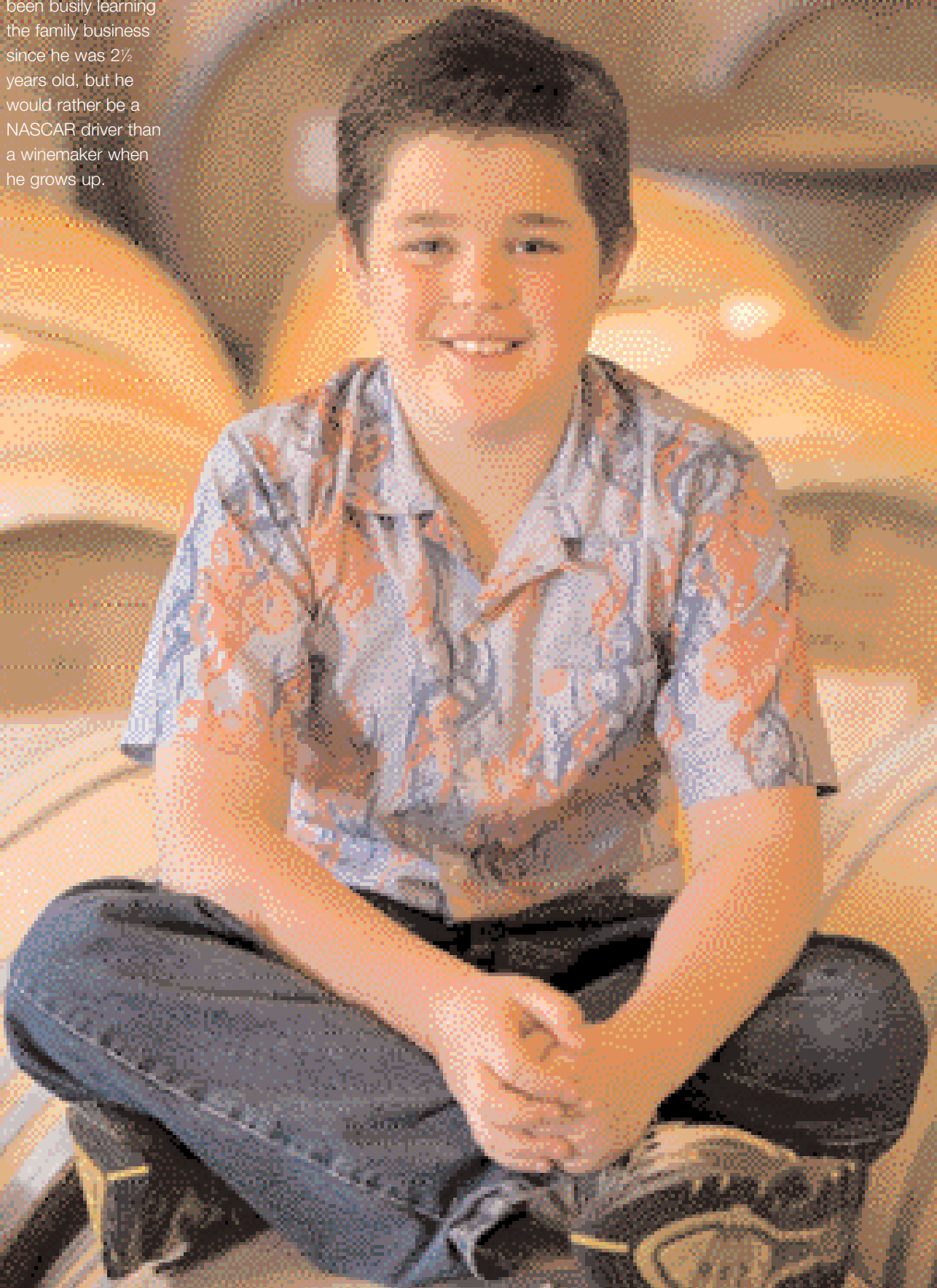


Ryan Coleman has been busily learning the family business since he was 2½ years old, but he would rather be a NASCAR driver than a winemaker when he grows up.



Are you smarter than a 4th grader?

Then get ready to meet the McMinnville kid who's the talk of the Willamette Valley.

BY ERIC DEGERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACKIE JOHNSTON

YOU WON'T FIND RYAN COLEMAN behind the tasting bar, manning the cash register or handling the thief, but his fingerprints — so to speak — are all over one of the most talked-about wines in the Willamette Valley.

He is, in fact, the boy behind the Coleman Vineyard 2005 Real Fine Racy Red Pinot Noir. Ryan, age 10, is a fourth-grader in McMinnville, Ore., and is a living definition of precocious.

"The Racy Red is a pretty large wine with fruity flavors and big tannins that are not bitter or rough," Ryan tells anyone and everyone. "I'm really happy with the results. It's really good."

He already sounds like a winemaker taking samples to a potential distributor, only he's not a winemaker. The ultimate responsibility belongs to his parents, Randy and Kim Coleman, who left Southern California for Oregon in 1999 to launch their 4,000-case, 30-acre estate winery.

"Ryan is not allowed to sell the wine, pour the wine or be the winemaker," Randy says. "And he's not legally able to own the money that is made from that. We're putting it away for his college education, and it's going into 401ks and IRAs."

So what all does Ryan do?

"Well, he gets in my way a lot," Randy says with the smile.

The Colemans have trained him to run the sorting line, but he also muscles up for punch down. On the lots for what the winery Web site refers to as the "fun Coleman family collaboration," Ryan selects the fermentation yeasts, compiles the data and consults on the blending trials of barrels allocated for the Racy Red.

A family friend designed the Racy Red label, which features a checkered flag and a numbered racecar. No. 8 is on the 2005 vintage — Ryan's age at the time of crush.

"He knows it all," says Kim, the winery's chemist. "He's



learning the science and the math. He's converting fractions to do the lab work before he even has it in school. He tastes wine at our dinner table, and we've taught our children to look for the balance in the wine and where it falls on the palate."

And like any good winemaker, Ryan will be the first one to tell you it starts in the vineyard. "If all you have are a bunch of raisins, you are not going to make good wine obviously," he said.

Armed with such insight, he tracked down neighbor Moe Momtazi, whose Momtazi Vineyard in the McMinnville AVA contributed heavily to the Colemans' soon-to-be released 2006 Racy Red.

"I've known Ryan for many years, and he's very easy to get along with, but the negotiations were quite a bit of a challenge," Momtazi says. "He's a really neat kid, but he's very savvy and tried to take advantage of his age when we were negotiating. He told me, 'I'm just starting my business, and I don't have much cash, so can we work something out where we swap fruit?'"

"He wanted to trade me some Pinot Gris for my Pinot Noir straight across, ton-for-ton! I told him, 'Ryan, it doesn't work that way.' Here I am selling him some of my best fruit that's grown biodynamically, and he tells me, 'I'm also giving you some really good fruit!' He really tried getting it done ton-for-ton. It took a couple of weeks of negotiations."

The kid knows what to do with the fruit when it comes in. He takes a week off from classes at the private school to work crush with his family, Ben the vineyard manager and volunteers.

"A day in harvest. Wow! It means getting up at 6 a.m. to help get everything plugged in, the bins and stuff," Ryan said. "This year, my dad said I could drive the tractor, so that's going to be cool."

Ryan also runs the hydraulics on the sorting line, working alongside adults each night until the job is done. “It means staying up really late, drinking Coke,” Ryan said. “Last harvest, I did drink a little coffee.”

Of course, that’s just the beginning.

“Fermentation. That’s another interesting one,” Ryan said. “There’s a little bit more griping because it’s really hard work. I get dressed in the morning and come out and do my punch downs, write all my information on a card with my brix and run my tests, which I do about three times a day. I connect the hoses. Make sure the bins are covered up because those fruit flies are bad. And I wipe down the sides of the tank with sulfur water. Then you figure out what kind of fermentation you want to use.”

He prefers the always-risky wild yeast fermentation, starting in 2004 with the 45-case inaugural vintage of Racy Red.

“As soon as he heard that word “wild,” that’s what he wanted to use,” his dad says. “We had never used it before, but in 2004, Ryan did, and we found a taste and mouth feel that we were looking for. Now, a third of all of our wines are indigenous fermentation.”

The 2005 Racy Red, made from estate fruit (\$24), received an “Excellent” rating in a double-blind tasting by Wine Press Northwest. See page xx in the Recent Releases section. Much of it went to NASCAR nuts around the country.

“We made 85 cases, but we could have sold 2,000 cases,” Ryan says, disappointed by the loss of potential sales to his driving idols. “I want to call Junior (Dale Earnhardt Jr.) and Tony Stewart and send them out some wine. Maybe Jeff Gordon, too, but I’m not so happy with him right now.”

Considering the source, the four barrels of 2006 will yield about 100 cases of what promises to be the fastest-moving Racy Red yet.

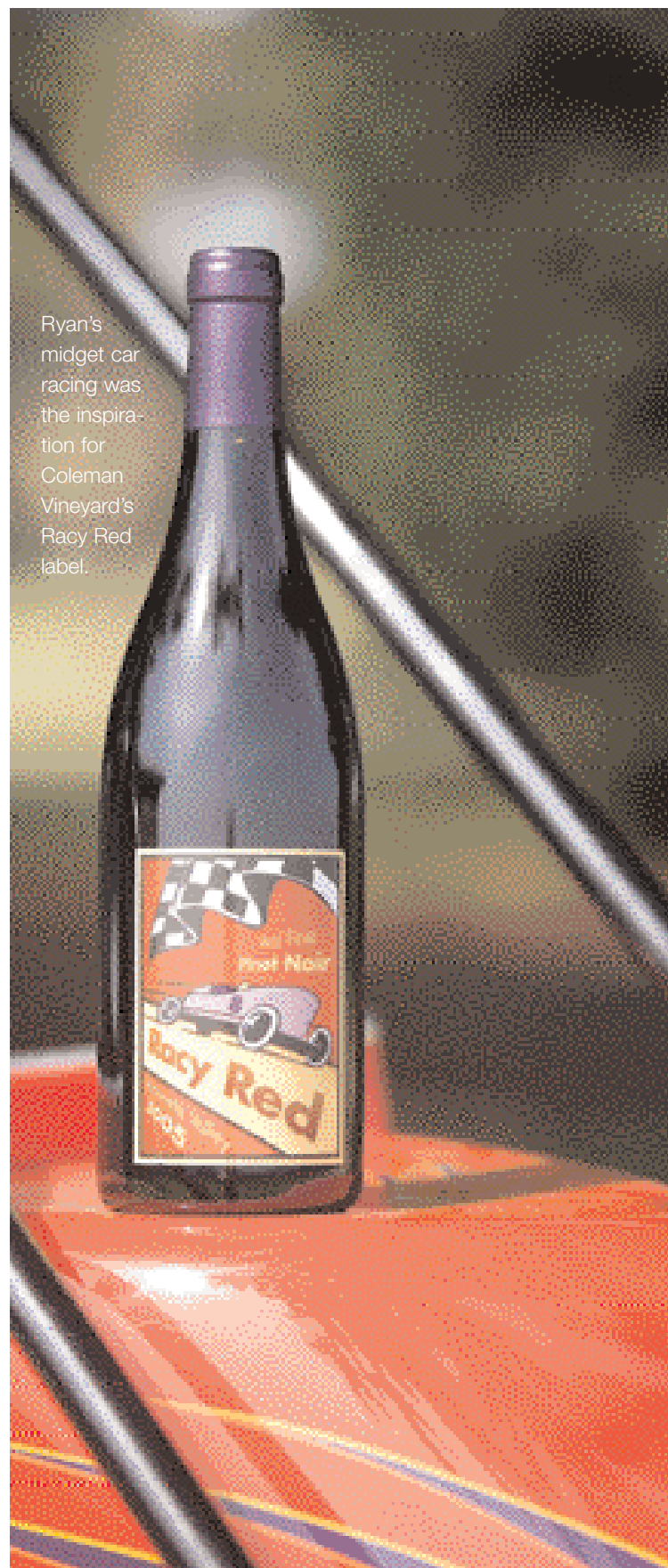
“I’m a good friend of Moe’s,” Ryan says. “He gave me some really good fruit, and I’m really thankful and happy.”

Momtazi says, “I haven’t tasted it, but it’s from some of our best fruit, and I told him with that fruit, he should charge \$50 a bottle. Ryan told me, ‘I don’t want to do that right away. I want to develop the business.’ ”

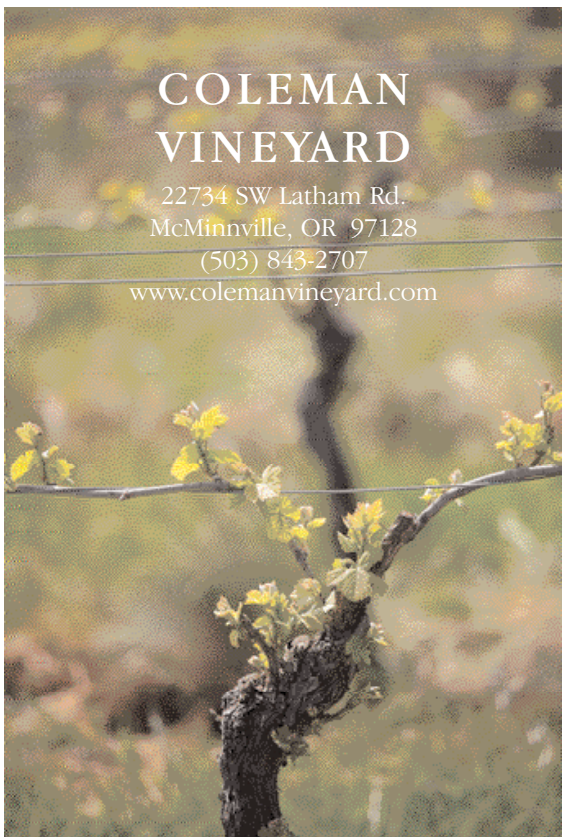
In reality, it’s the family livelihood, so Ryan’s parents are careful not to play up his involvement. They know others are watching, including the Oregon Liquor Control Commission.

“We are respectful of the law and respectful of people who might not think that kids should even be involved with alcohol,” Kim says, “but it is a farm, and growing and processing fruit is part of it.”

“I’ve only had positive experiences with the OLCC,” Kim says. “The investigator was very kind about it, and I think they are supportive of family businesses and agri-



Ryan's midget car racing was the inspiration for Coleman Vineyard's Racy Red label.



COLEMAN VINEYARD

22734 SW Latham Rd.
McMinnville, OR 97128
(503) 843-2707
www.colemanvineyard.com

culture in Oregon. I've felt they really want to just make sure we comply with the law and this doesn't harm us, either."

There is a history of underage winemakers in the Northwest. Two years ago, Victor Palencia, assistant winemaker for Willow Crest Winery in Prosser, Wash., graduated from Walla Walla Community College's Center of Enology and Viticulture at age 20.

Another winery in Prosser — Pontin Del Roza — was founded in 1984 by then-underage winemaker Scott Pontin as a Future Farmers of America project.

The Colemans wanted their children, Ryan and Katie, to grow up on a farm rather than in Southern California. Katie attended Oregon State University before retracing her mother's footsteps to the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

Ryan was whining to help with the wine before he could drive a tricycle.

"In 1999, when we made our first vintage, Ryan was 2½ years old," Kim recalls. "I had to do a lot of the punch downs that year, and there I was on a stepladder with a 2½-year-old pulling on my leg, screaming, 'I want to do it! I want to do it!' So he did. Every year, he's just gotten a little more involved."

These days, he's pestering Dad to let him plant a half-acre of grapes, even though there's plenty nearby.

It's easy to forget Ryan is 10, but his parents provide a balanced childhood. He plays baseball. He builds remote-control airplanes and takes flying instruction at nearby Evergreen Aviation Museum. Friends bring their skateboards and sleep over. He's on a swim club, and the family races Quarter Midget cars throughout the Northwest.

"The kid loves mechanics and aeronautics; he's really good in math and science and reading," his mother says. "He's just interested in so many things, and I think all anyone can really ask of their kid is that they are curious and interested in the world."

Which begs the question: What will he do when he grows up?

"That's a tough one," Ryan says with a rub of his peach-fuzz chin. "Winemaking? Maybe as a hobby, but I'd like to go to college and have a career as a NASCAR driver."

Include comedian as a possible career for Ryan Coleman, who has been known to entertain adult winemakers with a stream of blonde jokes.

"Someday, he's going to have a real nice college fund, which is his biggest push now," Randy says. "He's 10, and he's already talking about going to an Ivy League school. I have no idea where he finds all these things out."

So, what were you doing in the fourth grade? 🍷

ERIC DEGERMAN is *Wine Press Northwest's* managing editor. Have a suggestion for a future Match Maker? E-mail him at edegerman@winepressnw.com.

JACKIE JOHNSTON, a freelance photojournalist, is a regular contributor and the page designer for *Wine Press Northwest*. Her website's at: WineCountryCreations.com