

five questions

# Potent young wine, vintner

At 28, Justin Van Zanten is one of the freshest faces among Oregon winemakers. But don't call this Olympia native a rookie. After just two years in the wine biz, Van Zanten founded his J. Daan label, producing limited amounts of lip-smacking, affordable pinot noir and syrah.

He stoked his love for the Willamette Valley's prized grape working at the side of Adelsheim Vineyard's pinot-possessed winemaker, David Paige, before becoming assistant winemaker to Andrew Rich. Now Van Zanten juggles production of J. Daan while helping Rich craft a dozen eclectic wines.

**Q: So you started out wanting to brew beer; how did you get the wine bug?**

**A:** I started making beer and wine in my dorm room at Whitman (College). After graduation, I looked around to work at a brewery but ended up mucking out tanks at Erath and doing a little harvest work at Chehalem. By the '03 harvest, I was a full-time cellar rat at Adelsheim. From Day One working in wineries, I realized it was what I wanted to do and that I eventually wanted to have my own winery. In 2003, I started making pinot noir and syrah under my own label, J. Daan.

**Q: You were still pretty new to winemaking at the time. How did you figure out what you wanted in a wine?**

**A:** I guess you just develop an idea of what you like. For me, that's good acidity and good density of fruit but not too lush or fruity. It may have been premature to start a label so early on, but I felt that the best way to learn was to jump right in. So, yeah, I went in with a clear picture of what I was working toward, but a lot of the nuances in wine are up to nature.

**Q: Oregon pinot noir is notoriously expensive. How do you manage to make a \$20 pinot?**



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**Justin Van Zanten**  
With a pinot noir

**A:** Well, you have to start somewhere. Putting a new name out there, I wanted to make a relatively approachable pinot noir; \$20 isn't cheap for a bottle of wine, but it's pretty inexpensive by Oregon standards. As a young winemaker it just feels right. I think people should be able to drink good wine as often as possible; I always want my wine to be a good value.

**Q: Though next spring you're releasing a \$30 wine.**

**A:** Just a small quantity, between 25 and 50 cases. In the 2005 vintage, I had some really exceptional fruit so I wanted to do something a little special, a sort of reserve wine. But it won't become a policy.

**Q: What is it about pinot noir?**

**A:** I've gone back and forth a lot with pinot. It's such a frustrating wine, but when you get it right, it's really amazing. I think if you make wine in Oregon, you're almost obligated to make pinot, but you have to be careful. Pinot is transparent: It reflects everything you do to it.

*Get a taste of J. Daan wines, and many others, at the Thanksgiving weekend open house at the Carlton Winemakers Studio; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday-Sunday. 801 N. Scott St., Carlton; 503-852-6100. \$25; [www.jdaan.com](http://www.jdaan.com).*

—Christina Melander  
Special to The Oregonian