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Hat Ranch Winery to purchase Vale Wine Company

Owner Tim Harless will continue to produce wine under both labels

CALDWELL — Hat Ranch Winery has already produced award-winning varietals since it opened in 2011, and starting in 2014, it will begin making wine under the label of another local winery.

Hat Ranch sits on 10 acres in the Sunny Slope area of Caldwell. It features a tasting room to sample the winery's Riesling, unoaked chardonnay and tempranillo, and a bed and breakfast for overnight guests.

Beginning in January, owner Tim Harless will add the Vale Wine Company label to his offerings at the tasting room. He is purchasing Vale, which operates out of the University of Idaho Food and Wine Technology Center in Caldwell. Vale was started in 2008 by winemaker John Danielson, who will stay on as a consultant while teaching at The College of Idaho.

Ken Rufe racks a 2012 Syrah on Nov. 19 at the Vale Wine Co. in Caldwell. The company was recently purchased by Hat Ranch Winery.

“Vale is a turn-key winery and for us it's familiar,” Harless said. “We're ready to go here.”

Vale wines are available at local restaurants, and the winery has made a name for itself. It was named the 2013 Idaho Winery to Watch by Wine Press Northwest. “We want to grow (the business) organically,” he said. “... By combining both companies we hope to gain some traction.”

In the first year, he expects to produce about 1,500 to 1,800 cases between the two wineries. Harless plans to produce traditional varietals like chardonnay and Merlot under the Vale label, but venture away from that with Hat Ranch.

“The Hat Ranch lineup will be the stuff that's not so popular and we'll introduce it on a smaller basis,” he said.

That includes tempranillo. At the Food and Wine Technology Center last week, Harless compared notes with Harmony Wright, who does sales and marketing for Hat Ranch, while racking barrels of 2012 tempranillo. The two went through each barrel and took samples. “We take note of what stands out,” Wright said. “If it's really wowing us or if there's something there.”



Tempranillo grapes are popular in Spain, Harless said, and grown in a climate similar to Idaho's Snake River Viticultural Area. Hat Ranch's 2011 tempranillo was awarded a gold medal at the Great Northwest Wine Competition and Harless plans to plant 3 acres of the grape this spring.

GROWING BUSINESS

Harless began to take an interest in where the wine he was drinking came from years ago, he said. That led to making kit wine at home, then growing grapes and eventually opening his own winery.

Harless, who spent 14 years of active duty in the Air Force and 10 years in the reserves, and his wife moved to Idaho from Texas, but also considered Oregon, Washington and California as places to make their wine.

"Idaho struck us as having a lot of potential," he said.

He and other winemakers in the area are working to make the Sunny Slope Wine Trail, home to seven wineries, a destination to attract more people. The Sunny Slope Wine Trail Group received a \$30,000 grant through the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's 2013 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, to help accomplish that goal.



Harmony Wright, with Hat Ranch Winery, tastes a 2012 tempranillo Tuesday at the Vale Wine Co. headquarters in Caldwell. Hat Ranch opened in 2011 and recently purchased Vale Wine Co.