

Coiled path leads winemaker Leslie Preston back home

BY ANDY PERDUE AND ERIC DEGERMAN

Special to Treasure Magazine February 22, 2014

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google Plus](#) [Reddit](#) [E-mail](#) [Print](#)



Leslie Preston of Coiled Wines shares a tasting room and warehouse space in Garden City with Cinder and Telaya wineries.

DARIN OSWALD — doswald@idahostatesman.com [Buy Photo](#)

Leslie Preston took a roundabout path to make wine in her hometown, which begins to explain why Coiled struck her as apropos for the name of her Garden City winery.

“To be honest, winemaking started as a misguided interest,” she said. “I wanted to find something that blended traveling and studies in France. Apparently, I’m a slow learner, because it took me awhile to get it.”

There’s little doubt Preston made the right decision.

Her 2012 Dry Riesling (\$17) ranked as one of the Pacific Northwest’s top Rieslings last year, landing at No. 44 on The Seattle Times’ top 50 wines of 2013 after winning best of show at the 2013 Idaho Wine Competition. That gold medal came as little surprise considering her 2011 Dry Riesling earned a gold in 2012. The 2010 Black Mamba (\$28) — a bold blend of Syrah and Petite Sirah — also garnered a gold medal. And the Coiled 2010 Sidewinder (\$25), a Syrah, received a silver medal at the 2013 Great Northwest Wine Competition staged in Hood River, Ore.

That meandering road to wine started well after Preston — Boise High class of ’89 — graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in romance languages.

“Yes, very practical,” she said with a smirk. “I recommend it to anyone.”

Preston did use that background to help her get a position teaching French literature at the nation’s top university for wine — University of California-Davis. And it’s where she met her husband, Ross Lamm.

“It was at a grad school mixer with the engineering program and the French lit program,” she said with a chuckle. “Yep. We met in a bar!”

The Davis campus also was the site of her epiphany.

“Literature is definitely an interest of mine, and I discovered that because I love writing, but academia is a pretty ugly world,” Preston said. “I found that it wasn’t one that I wanted to be a part of, so I took a step back and wondered why I got on this path? I was lucky enough to have some wine students in my classes because they were taking French literature in preparation for apprenticeships abroad.”

After some contemplation, entering the wine industry seemed to be a natural fit for Preston.

“I wanted something that was less esoteric and something that was a ritual — a part of your regular, everyday life, and I have always had a reverence for food and wine,” she said. “It’s something that’s super complex and yet simple. I thought, ‘I can do that with wine.’ I loved that it was so a part of families and something that people have done for generations.”

And because she was part of the faculty, she got a first-rate education at Davis in her new career. She had no science background, but that didn't faze her. From 2001 to 2003, she picked off the prerequisites and worked at wineries while working on her master's degree in enology.

The list of wineries included Clos du Bois and Saintsbury before she landed a job at famed Stags' Leap Winery working for Robert Brittan, the Oregon State University product who elevated the Napa Valley brand and used Petite Sirah as his signature wine during his 17 years there.

"She had a good palate and a real focus on quality," Brittan said. "There were three of us on the winemaking team — her, Danielle Cyrot and myself — and it was one of the better teams we ever had at Stags' Leap."

Preston spent two years working for Brittan before he left for the Willamette Valley in 2005 to make Pinot Noir under his own brand.

"I liked Leslie a lot," Brittan said. "She's one of those people who are really sweet, kind and genuine. At the same time, she's got a real determination to do things her way, but there's still a sweetness about it. She was a delight to work with."

Brittan said he noticed no difference in Preston's dedication when she started her family. And there was little doubt in his mind about her long-range plan.

"I remember how staunchly proud she was about Idaho, and she just really wanted to make Syrah in Idaho. That was a really big thing for her," Brittan said. "The whole time she worked with us she was just really bullish on trying to make great wine."

It was Brittan's resignation from one of the country's most recognized wineries that proved to be a critical point in Preston's life.

"He was terrific to work for, and my move to Idaho came just when he was leaving, which made it that much harder," she said. "There was the opportunity to become the assistant winemaker, which would have meant more recognition, but it also meant that I would have to work around the clock. That's not where I was. It was an amazing job, and I loved the job, but I would have been giving up some of my time with family — and that time is super meaningful to me."

The transition to making wine in Idaho took time. Preston's first vintage with Idaho fruit was 2006, when she made seven barrels of Syrah in Boise at Fraser Vineyards. That vintage of Syrah also marked the debut of another Boise winemaker — Melanie Krause of Cinder Wines.

"In 2007, I had another child on the way, and it was overwhelming to launch a new brand out of state with a new baby," Preston said.

A year later, she launched Coiled with a production of 400 cases, but it wasn't until 2012 that she moved her family to the town where she grew up.

“My husband is a sailor and a California boy,” Preston said. “We loved California and had a good life there, but we knew we needed to stop doing this back and forth or we needed to move. The production part was OK, but selling it while living out of state was the hard part.”

Now that she's a local girl who's done well and come home, Coiled Wines is a much easier sell with her face behind the wine. And last fall, Preston increased production to nearly 1,000 cases.

Even the move into the 44th Street Wineries complex in Garden City seemed natural for her because three of the winemakers — and Preston's first employee — are mothers.

“Logistically, this is central to how we work together because the baby is part of everything,” Preston said. “I am really proud of this. It is not easy, but we are making it work and I think that aspect of Coiled is as important as the role of Idaho fruit.”

Among those winemaking mothers is Kathryn House, founder of the wine education laboratory House of Wine.

“Leslie has many strengths when it comes to winemaking,” House said. “While her pedigree is impressive, it's more of an affirmation as to the type of winemaker that she is — instinctive, passionate, hard-working, fun-loving and honest. She puts the same, if not more, intensity into working her Idaho fruit as she did in Napa, and having a winemaker of that caliber in our industry is invaluable.

“Plus, she's fun to be around,” House added. “Despite whatever winemaking dilemma comes her way, she can navigate the path and do so laughing at the end, with a great story to share. That's an essential winemaking skill that those who make wine for a living can truly appreciate.”

Preston left behind scores of winemaking pals in California, and there are plans to make some Petite Sirah with Cyrot and her husband, Bruce Devlin. She'd love to see more Petite Sirah grown in the Snake River Valley, but she might need to take matters into her own hands to make that happen.

“My hope is to own part of a vineyard at some point,” Preston said. “My husband chokes at the sound of that. Maybe it's not smart and maybe it's not a strength of mine, but I want to be a part of the collaborative and the passion in Idaho and see Idaho take the next step.”

While Preston misses her California friends, her home state provides virtually everything else she wants from life.

“I love to run and love to be outside, and that has been to me the best thing about moving to Idaho,” she said. “It’s such an outdoors culture here. It can be 10 degrees with ice, and people are still outside biking and running. It’s super therapeutic and a super place for my kids.”

And her husband, a software engineer in Boise, and their boys still go boating somewhat regularly — only it’s on Payette Lake in McCall instead of San Francisco Bay.

Andy Perdue and Eric Degerman run Great Northwest Wine, a news and information website. Learn more about wine and see more of their stories at GreatNorthwestWine.com.