

2014 Idaho Winery to Watch: Hat Ranch Winery

BY ERIC DEGERMAN

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Life would be much different for Tim Harless had he followed the herd and brought a six-pack of beer to that summer party in Wichita Falls, Texas.

“It was an informal thing with six or eight other people, and they all had brought beer,” he said. “It was 100 degrees, and I was drinking my chilled Sauvignon Blanc. They told me, ‘We know someone you ought to meet.’ ”

That’s how Tim and Dr. Helen Harless got paired up in 2006. A mutual love for wine and their desire to live in the country led them to the Snake River Valley and launch Hat Ranch Winery — Wine Press Northwest’s Idaho Winery to Watch.

“There are only 50 wineries in Idaho, so we won’t get lost, and the community has been fantastic,” he said.

His early wines have helped him stand out. From a critical standpoint, the Hat Ranch 2011 Tempranillo might be his top wine, earning a gold medal at the 2013 Great Northwest Wine Competition. A year prior, his 2011 Chardonnay picked up a gold at the Northwest Wine Summit.

This winter, he took a major step by acquiring Vale Wine Co. — the 2013 Idaho Winery to Watch — from his mentor, John Danielson.

“I worked alongside John for three years making our own wines, and he would let me bounce ideas off of him and ask him to double-check the crazy wine math,” Harless said. “Now I feel comfortable with how everything works at this facility. You get to know your kitchen pretty well.”

Tim, 50, has spent much of his life strapped into a cockpit. He graduated from Ohio State with a degree in aerospace engineering before becoming an instructor pilot in the Air Force with 10 years of active duty and more than a decade in the reserves. His interest and inspiration for wine began when he took his parents to Italy for a vacation. It led to winemaking classes at Grayson County Community College in Denison, Texas.

“Some people get a boat and go bass fishing. Some have a cabin in the woods and go hunting,” he said. “This is my hobby.”

Helen’s background in the industry came when she lived in the Bay Area and spent two years working for Wine Spectator, which included her role as assistant tasting coordinator of the magazine’s blind judgments. However, they met in 2006 in Texas, where Helen was finishing up her first tour in the Air Force as a dentist. She’d achieved the rank of captain and was still sorting out her career path.

“She was exiting, so I had to act fast,” Tim said with a chuckle.

They scouted the West Coast before landing on the Sunnyslope and launching Hat Ranch — named for his great-grandparents Wyoming homestead — in 2011 with their 2009 Hat Trick Red, a blend of Merlot, Malbec and Syrah. Their total production was 450 cases.

At this point, there are four Hat Ranch wines, which include a Merlot and an off-dry Riesling. In its brief history, Hat Ranch has received at least a silver medal in regional competitions with each wine they make. He will produce 800 cases from the 2013 vintage, but he’s gearing up to make a combined 1,200 cases between the Hat Ranch and Vale brands. He’ll continue to use the winemaking facilities at the University of Idaho’s incubator in Caldwell for both.

And when they can find all the plant material they are looking for, Hat Ranch will be planted with about 5 acres of vines in equal amounts of Muscat Ottonel, Tempranillo and — of

course — Sauvignon Blanc. The vineyard is just below the deck of their B&B and by the tasting room, which has a view of the Owyhee Mountains.

“At my age, I want to make wine for another 10 to 15 years,” he said. “We’ll stay here and see how big this thing gets. Any recognition that the Boise area and Idaho gets lifts all of our boats. Right now, from where we sit and by the looks of the Snake River Valley, it’s pretty nice.”

Eric Degerman is co-owner of Great Northwest Wine, a news and information website. Go to www.greatnorthwestwine.com.