

2014 Idaho Winery of the Year: Coiled Wines

BY ERIC DEGERMAN

Wine Press Northwest March 11, 2014



When Leslie Preston left Boise for college, she had no idea making Idaho wine would bring her back home.

The journey began at the University of Oregon to study romance languages, which got her into the nation's top winemaking school — University of California-Davis — as a French Lit instructor.

She knew little about wine, even though it surrounded her. Winemaking students would take her class in preparation for internships in France.

“To be honest, winemaking started as a misguided interest,” Preston 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.”

But her intelligence and dedication, combined with guidance from famous professors and mentors, developed into Coiled Wines, which is Wine Press Northwest's 2014 Idaho Winery of the Year.

"The real purpose for Coiled is to make the best wine I can from Idaho fruit and be a part of what's going on here," Preston said.

Her 2012 Dry Riesling ranked as one of the Pacific Northwest's best last year, landing at No. 44 on The Seattle Times' top 50 wines of 2013 after winning best of show at the Idaho Wine Competition.

"I didn't know a lot about Riesling before I came to Idaho, I just know that I love to drink it," she said. "I didn't expect to be blown away by this grape."

And yet, she's quickly established a reputation with the Germanic white as her 2011 Dry Riesling earned a gold the year prior in the state competition, as did her 2010 Black Mamba (\$28) — a bold blend of Syrah and Petite Sirah. The Coiled 2010 Sidewinder (\$25), a Syrah, received a silver medal at the 2013 Great Northwest Wine Competition staged in Hood River, Ore.

"I'm a little more comfortable experimenting and a little more confident as a winemaker because I've had more years with this fruit," Preston said. "The first couple of years making my own wine was terrifying. I was, 'Oh, crap, I'm responsible for everything!'"

In 2001, she had no science background, but that didn't stop Preston from earning her master's degree in enology at Davis while working at wineries. That list included Clos du Bois and Saintsbury before she landed a job at famed Stags' Leap Winery with Robert Brittan, who elevated the Napa Valley brand and used Petite Sirah as his signature wine during his 17 years there.

"She was a delight to work with, and I remember how staunchly proud she was about Idaho" said Brittan, who resigned in 2005 to launch Brittan Vineyards back in his home state of Oregon. "She really wanted to make Syrah in Idaho. That was a big thing for her."

An opportunity to advance at Stags' Leap came just after Preston and her husband, software engineer Ross Lamb, started their family.

"It was an amazing job, but I didn't want to be away from my son as much as I would have," she said. "The bulk of my friends were in the wine world, and it was a world that I still wanted to be a part of, but I needed to do it a different way."

Her transition to Idaho winemaking took time. The first vintage was 2006, when she made seven barrels of Syrah in Boise at Fraser Vineyards.

“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. “The challenges of motherhood have been the source of a lot of creativity.”

A year later, she established Coiled with 400 cases, but it wasn't until 2012 when she moved her family to her hometown.

“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 back home, Coiled Wines is a much easier sell with Preston's face behind the brand. Last fall, she increased production to nearly 1,000 cases, and the 44th Street Winemakers co-op that Coiled shares with Cinder Wines and Telaya has Boise buzzing about wine.

“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.”

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