

History growing on the vine

A winemaking renaissance is bringing interest - and heightened attention - to the area

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JULIAETTA - The tempting scent of brewer's yeast and fermenting grapes is detectable nearly a half mile away from the Colter's Creek Winery south of here.

A narrow gravel road winds through pine trees and a vineyard down into a picturesque vale where the winery and a couple of residences sit alongside the Potlatch River.

Rows of grapevines line the hillside in various stages of growth - some newly planted, others harvested and still more vines waiting to be picked during this peak of the harvest season. Inside the winery - a converted pole building - dozens of white vats the size of hot tubs are filled with fermenting grapes. Several times a day a worker stirs the mix, and when the potion is just right the grapes are dumped into a giant crusher and destemmer. From there, the juice that becomes the wine emerges.

Melissa Sanborn, who, with her husband, Michael Pearson, started the winery in 2007, said it is in aggressive expansion mode - the result of past success and a need to keep up with current demand.

"This is a really great grape-growing area," Sanborn said. "We've doubled our production from last year to keep up with demand. The wine industry is definitely changing, and it's kind of exciting."

Sanborn and Pearson are part of a new generation of wine producers in this area who are beginning to see their businesses flourish.

But, as Coco Umiker of Clearwater Canyon Cellars in Lewiston points out, these new winemakers are merely reviving a tradition that put Idaho on the map of fine wines more than a century ago.

"Knowing that history was very empowering," Umiker said. "We thought, we're actually just bringing back a legacy of winemaking to the valley."

According to the Idaho Wine Commission, the first grapes planted in Idaho were grown in Lewiston in 1864.

Louis Desol and Robert Schleicher from France and Jacob Schaefer of Germany turned the Clearwater River area into a successful wine-producing region in 1872, winning a number of gold medals in expositions around the country and achieving a reputation for fine wines.

National Prohibition, which followed state prohibition in 1919 and lasted until 1933, took its toll on the wine regions, its growers and makers, and it wasn't until 1970 that wine grapes were again planted in Idaho, this time along the Snake River in southwestern Idaho. That region was named the first American Viticulture Area in the state in 2007.



A petition has been filed with the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau of the U.S. Department of the Treasury to designate a portion of north central Idaho, along with three counties in southeastern Washington an American Viticulture Area. (See related story).

Both Sanborn and Pearson, along with Coco and Karl Umiker, got into the wine business with the notion of capitalizing on the area's rich wine history and a desire to make fine wines from locally grown grapes.

The Umikers started their winery with three other couples in 2004 and the business grew slowly. Clearwater Canyon Cellars' main vineyard is at the top of Gun Club Road on a farm Coco Umiker's family had worked for generations.

"We wanted to see this go, not just because we're into winemaking, but also because we wanted to bring back notoriety to the valley for this winemaking heritage it once had," said Coco Umiker. "We want to compete on a world level with our wines, and because of that we just kept growing slowly."

"We just saw this area as fantastic for grape and wine production," Karl Umiker added.

From the first vintage in 2004 of four barrels of what the Umikers call Renaissance Red, the Umikers are now producing about 2,000 cases of reds and whites and in recent wine competitions - some by invitation only - Clearwater Cellars is bringing home an impressive amount of gold medals.

The Umikers expect to harvest about 37 tons of fruit this year from their own vineyards. About 70 percent of their wine is made from homegrown grapes; the remainder comes from grape growers in eastern Washington.

Colter's Creek Winery has been producing grapes since the mid-1980s, but it wasn't until Sanborn and Pearson took over in 2007 that the winery was developed commercially.

At that time there were about 7 acres in production. This year Sanborn and Pearson have about 20 acres growing grapes with another 4 to 5 acres ready next year.

About 75 percent to 80 percent of the wine made at Colter's Creek is made from their own grapes. The rest are purchased from growers in eastern Washington or southern Idaho, Sanborn said.

During harvest, both vineyards have capitalized on the help of volunteers - many of them from teams or other groups - who pick grapes in exchange for donations to their programs.

In addition Colter's Creek employs 12 full- and part-time employees. The Umikers are still working their vineyards and winery by themselves.

Clearwater Cellars opens its tasting room at the Port of Lewiston on Saturday afternoons, and Coco Umiker said there are times when the place is packed. The rest of the wine is sold in local restaurants or shipped out of the area.



Colter's Creek sells most of its wine from its restaurant in downtown Juliaetta. Sanborn and Pearson bought an historic building and have remodeled it to serve gourmet food and showcase their wine.

Sanborn said it's paying off, not only in day-to-day sales, but in helping to cultivate a growing clientele of wine aficionados.

"I was pleasantly shocked how many people were wine drinkers in the area," she said. "And there are a lot of people, they're intimidated by this perception that wine is this kind of high-class drink. I think from the get-go our goal has been to try to engage all levels of wine drinkers so anybody who comes in our door is treated as their palate is the right palate. And I think we've converted a lot of people into drinking wine or going from sweeter, fruitier wines to things that are a little more aged."

Although it's exciting times for the wine industry here there is caution that expansion doesn't compromise the quality of the product.

"I hope that it's not like Walla Walla, because they're very saturated with wineries and it makes it very difficult for people like us to be a part of the wine industry and to start something new," Karl Umiker said. "I would love for the industry in the valley to stay a little smaller with the wineries here focusing on really high-quality wines."

