

Ste. Michelle's Corliss headlines Idaho wine industry seminar

By: Eric Degerman, February 20, 2015

BOISE, Idaho — Ste. Michelle Wine Estates doesn't operate a winery, own a vineyard or buy grapes in the Snake River Valley, and yet the Pacific Northwest's industry leader wants to help Idaho.

Kevin Corliss, Ste. Michelle's vice president of vineyard operations, spent an hour Thursday as a guest speaker at the Idaho Wine Commission's annual meeting of winemakers and grape growers in Boise.

"Sharing with others is part of our culture," Corliss told Great Northwest Wine. "I come down every few years. It's always a good idea to maintain contact with other growing regions and see how people are doing things. We always pick up new information, new thoughts and maybe a different angle."

All it took to get Corliss to drive 600 miles round-trip to Boise was a polite phone call, said Moya Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission.

"I always tell people, 'If you are nice to other people, they'll be nice to you,'" Dolsby said. "I would love it if Ste. Michelle came over to Idaho and planted grapes and built a winery, but I didn't think of that as an ulterior motive when I asked Kevin to come."

Last week, the proud Washington State University graduate received the Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers' Industry Service Award, but the respect he's earned during his three decades of vineyard work goes well beyond state lines. One of his many successful former employees is Melanie Krause. The Boise winemaker and her husband, Joe Schnerr, have turned Cinder Wines into Idaho's hottest brand.

"I have friends down here, and Mel worked for me, so it's a way for me to reconnect with them, too," Corliss said.

Following Corliss on the agenda was Karl Umiker, a soil scientist, vineyard manager and co-owner of Clearwater Canyon Cellars in Lewiston.

"It's certainly an honor for me to give a talk in the same room as Kevin Corliss," Umiker said at the start of his presentation.



Kevin Corliss, shown here in Cold Creek Vineyard, serves as vice president of vineyards for Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. The Washington State University graduate began working for Ste. Michelle in 1986. He received the Walter Clore Award in 2006, which recognizes individuals who serve and make significant contributions to the Washington state grape industry. Last week, he was recognized with the Industry Service award at the Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers conference in Kennewick. (Photo courtesy of Ste. Michelle Winery).



Corliss sees similarities between Idaho, Washington

As Corliss began his presentation at the Boise Hotel and Conference Center, he opened with a trip down Memory Lane that sparked laughter around the room.

“This reminds me of the 1985 growers’ meeting at the Red Lion in Pasco,” said Corliss, who would meet the late Walter Clore at their Yakima Valley church each Sunday. “Back then, WAWGG was just a very small group. Everybody knew everybody, and there was a lot of excitement, energy and opportunity. It’s nice to see that here.”



Skyline Vineyard near Nampa is Idaho’s large planting at 400 acres. (Photo courtesy of Precept Wine)

There’s certainly a difference in scale, though. Last week’s annual WAWGG meeting drew more than 2,400 attendees. There were 84 winemakers, growers and exhibitors this week in the Treasure Valley. And while Washington can boast more than 50,000 acres of vineyard, there are just 1,300 acres of vines in Idaho.

Combined production among Idaho’s 51 wineries stands at about 200,000 cases annually. Chateau Ste. Michelle bottled more than 600,000 cases of its 2013 Columbia Valley Chardonnay.

One of the key points to Corliss’ presentation hit upon mechanization, a push driven by the labor shortage that plagues many grape growers in the Pacific Northwest. He used Columbia Crest’s Horse Heaven Vineyard as a prime example because portions of it have been transitioned into mechanical management for a variety of reasons.

“I don’t know if you all have a labor issue here, but we can see the tsunami coming,” Corliss said. “Getting the hand labor to do that work is getting tougher and tougher and tougher.”

Ste. Michelle began to mechanically prune a modified block of Gewürztraminer in 1988. Corliss produced a slide that indicated the cost to prune an acre by hand was \$210.32 vs. \$9.70 by machine. For shoot thinning, he said the costs were \$153.29 vs. \$9.97 per acre. Advancements have come so far that machine harvesting and optical sorting now contribute fruit to some of Ste. Michelle’s higher-tier wines.

“Vineyard technology has blossomed beyond my imagination,” Corliss said. “We want to try to string together all these pieces that we’ve been playing with the last 20 to 30 years.”

Idaho wine industry earning lawmakers support

A new poster card about as tall and wide as a Bordeaux bottle sums up wine’s current role in the Gem State — “Idaho’s fastest-growing agricultural industry.”

Roger Batt, lobbyist for the Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers, said that little brochure carries a fair bit of weight in the halls of the state Capitol. Hard data illustrates the Idaho wine

industry's \$169 million impact, the 1,226 full-time jobs and the \$10.5 million in state and local taxes paid.

"There is a percentage of the Idaho legislature that has religious beliefs and does not believe in alcohol or consumption of or shipments to," Batt said in his report to growers on Wednesday. "This is part of our job to work around, despite having established this industry as Idaho's fastest growing agricultural industry."

The state Legislature has 105 members, Batt pointed out, and "most of our legislators really do support the industry."

Dolsby smiled broadly as she shared another indicator of traction — Idaho wines made up 8.5 percent of the state's market share through the first three quarters of 2014. "Last year, we had 5.2 percent for 2013," Dolsby said.

By comparison, nearby Washington state has a market share of around 40 percent, meaning that out of every 100 bottles of wine sold in Washington, about 40 are made in the Evergreen State. The market share in California is closer to 80 percent, while traditional European wine regions such as France, Italy, Spain and Germany have close to 100 percent market share.

Idaho's growth has been constricted by the limited amount of vineyard expansion. A total of 1,300 acres of vineyard now supply 51 wineries, an average of 25 acres per winery. In Washington, where there are more than 850 wineries and more than 50,000 acres planted, the average is closer to 50 acres per winery.

"We need more grapes, and I hear rumblings all the time about more grapes going in," Dolsby said.

Savor Idaho gears up for 6th straight sellout

Savor Idaho, the state's marquee wine event, will be Sunday, June 14, and it gathers nearly 30 wineries and 20 restaurants at the Idaho Botanical Garden in Boise.

The Taste Washingtonesque event has sold all of its 900 tickets for the past five years, and the wine commission no longer uses the phrase "Save the date" in its promotional materials.

"I start getting calls in December asking when tickets go on sale," said marketing manager Sara Dirks.

Tickets go on sale March 1.

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Moya Dolsby has been serving as the executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission since 2008. (Photo by Eric Degerman/Great Northwest Wine)



NOTES: Batt seemed optimistic that state lawmakers will allow Idaho vintners to roll out a growler program this spring, “with the caveat that we have some sort of agreement on how to seal the container.” ... Two of the country’s Masters of Wine – Woodinville, Wash., winemaker Bob Betz and Kansas City author/educator Doug Frost – return to the Snake River Valley in August for Idaho’s Wine Quality Initiative. It will be the second straight year that Idaho vintners will have their wines reviewed and critiqued by the MWs. Boise-based consultant Kathryn House, a former assistant winemaker at Betz Family Winery, is credited with helping bring Betz and Frost to Idaho Ron Bitner, Idaho’s only certified sustainable grower, stood up and encouraged others to follow the steps and join him in the Low Input Viticulture and Enology (LIVE) movement. “If we want to be players in the Northwest, we need to be part of this,” Bitner told the audience. ... Hailey Minder, assistant winemaker of Telaya Wine Co., was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship for continuing education from the Idaho Wine Commission.

