

# Idaho Winery of the Year: Clearwater Canyon Cellars

By: Eric Degerman, March 16, 2015

It's a good thing Karl and Coco Umiker started young.

They've toiled as husband and wife/viticulturalist and winemaker in their own private corner of Idaho's wine industry since 2003, but these former competitive cyclists really found their cadence last year in some of the West Coast's largest wine competitions.

"It seemed like every competition we entered, one of our wines took top honors," Coco said. "We were the only winery the Pacific Northwest that had two wines in Great Northwest Wine's top 25. We were on The Seattle Times top 50 list. We won a Platinum for our 2012 Carménère and a Double Platinum for our estate 2012 Merlot from Wine Press Northwest, and the year started when our 2011 Carménère got a gold at the San Francisco Chronicle. It was an amazing year in terms of awards. We look at it as confirmation that we're on the right track."

And 105 years after the town of Lewiston voted itself dry, Clearwater Canyon Cellars is Wine Press Northwest's Idaho Winery of the Year for 2015.

History, tradition and hard work are not lost upon the Umikers. They — along with the husband/wife team of Mike Pearson and Melissa Sanborn at Colter's Creek Winery — are spearheading the petition for the establishment of the Lewis-Clark Valley American Viticultural Area, which is expected to be open for commenting this spring. Before Prohibition, this region included a 130-acre vineyard, then believed to be the largest in the Pacific Northwest.

"What has inspired us is really doing something different," Karl said. "When we started the vineyard, there was nobody commercially growing grapes here, so when we would read up on the history of this area and what it used to be, we thought, 'Hey, this could be big!' Unlocking the secrets and the potential of this place was really the excitement for us."

And that's why they take special pride in their Umiker Vineyard Merlot, the highest scoring Merlot in the 2014 Platinum. Their 2012 Estate Syrah and 2012 Renaissance Red — the latter a tribute to the return of the wine industry to the valley — also earned gold medals at the Idaho Wine Competition and Great Northwest Invitational. They also have Cabernet Franc and Chardonnay planted at 1,300 feet elevation among those 4 acres, which they could nearly double when the time is right.



*Karl and Coco Umiker in their barrel room at Clearwater Canyon Cellars*  
PHOTO BY DAVID WITTHAUS, NORTHWEST MEDIA PRODUCTIONS

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“We’ve stuck with those core varieties because as a new growing area, we felt those needed to be proven first,” said Karl, who first planted the vineyard in 2003.

While they are working with their own fruit and a handful of local growers, Clearwater Canyon Cellars also relies on renowned growers in Washington such as Dave Verhey in the Yakima Valley and Dick Beightol at Phinny Hill in the Horse Heaven Hills. Ironically, they met their source for Carménère before they even began making wine. In 2003, both Karl and Coco were still on the University of Idaho cycling team when they happened to ride alongside Beightol.

“Dick and Paul Champoux have been amazing mentors over the years,” Coco said. “Our first pruning experience was with Paul, then we’d drink, have dinner and spend the night over at Dick’s house, and get up the next morning and go on bike rides.”

The fall of 2004, in particular, proved a turning point in Coco’s winemaking career as she worked at Whitman Cellars for Steve Lessard while taking classes from the late Stan Clarke at Walla Walla Community College. One of her classmates was Beightol, who drove daily from Phinny Hill to learn how to be a better grower.

“It was an incredible time for me,” she said. “I learned so much just by osmosis working with them, which included playing racquetball with Stan.”

When it comes to education, the Umikers are quite rich. Karl, a University of Arkansas chemistry graduate, earned his doctorate in soil science at the University of Idaho, where he led the club cycling team. Coco, who grew up in Boise as a competitive cyclist and spent summers on her grandfather’s farm in Lewiston, studied microbiology and biochemistry at Idaho before receiving her Ph.D in food science at Washington State University.

The 2012 vintage was the first when neither had a job either teaching or doing research, and those Clearwater Canyon Cellars wines reflect that.

What started in 2004 with 300 cases in a Lewiston garage and eight partners has grown to 3,000 cases at their Port of Lewiston vinification facility near the Clearwater River. They would sell more if they had more. In the meantime, they are happy knowing they’ve bought out all the partners, own their forklift and recently replaced their hand-me-down Korean War-era tractor and hand-ratcheted basket press.

“We were very young to have started a winery,” Coco said. “When we started this process, I was 20 and living in a trailer park and going to school, but we were really interested in wine. And obviously we had the science background.”

