

Fujishin Family Cellars brings energy to Idaho wine industry

By Andy Perdue, October 29, 2015



Martin Fujishin grew up on a farm in the Snake River Valley, so he's quite comfortable on a tractor or forklift. Today, Fujishin is owner of Fujishin Family Cellars in Caldwell and is one of the Idaho wine industry's rising stars. (Photo by Andy Perdue/Great Northwest Wine)

CALDWELL, Idaho – Martin Fujishin is the hardest-working person in the Idaho wine industry.

For a guy who's been making wine for less than a decade, the owner of Fujishin Family Cellars in the Sunnyslope Wine District is as involved as anyone: He manages vineyards, makes wine, educates, takes advantage of the newest laws and generally evangelizes for the burgeoning Idaho wine industry.

"Anything worth doing is worth overdoing," Fujishin said with a smile. "Farming is the way I grew up. When you farm, you either go all the way or you don't do it at all. There's no in between. I love what I do."

Fujishin, who also works as the assistant winemaker for Koenig Vineyards, helps craft dozens of different wines each year and reveals enthusiasm and energy that give hope to this small industry.

Growing up in the Snake River Valley

Fujishin grew up in the tiny town of Adrian, Ore., just northwest of Caldwell on the west side of the Snake River.

He is Japanese on his father's side and French-Norwegian on his mother's side. His great-grandfather moved to the United States from Japan in the early 1900s, and his father was born in a labor camp in Caldwell. His mother grew up in Horseshoe Bend north of Boise, and the two met at what is now the College of Idaho.



Martin Fujishin, right, got started in the wine industry working for Greg Koenig, left. Today, the two are a big part of the Sunnyslope Wine District near Caldwell, Idaho. (Photo by Andy Perdue/Great Northwest Wine)



Fujishin and his brother grew up on a 200-acre farm in Adrian, where the family raised row crops.

“I just loved growing up here,” he said. “Adrian is about 150 people. It was great to be a part of that small community and just a really neat place to grow up out on the edge of the high desert.”

Fujishin began his wine career working in the Koenig Vineyards tasting room in Caldwell. He started out as an attendant and ultimately was promoted to tasting room manager.

“I spent three years working the tasting room every weekend and really enjoyed it and kind of fell in love with the wine industry there,” he said. “It was a really fun way to get started in the business.”

After three years, Fujishin took a one-year break to work as a counselor at Idaho Youth Ranch. But the pull of farming and a love for wine tugged him back to the Sunnyslope area.

“I really missed the wine industry, and I missed the people,” he said.

So in 2007, he contacted Ron Bitner, owner of Bitner Vineyards, one of the oldest plantings in the Snake River Valley. Bitner was looking for a vineyard manager, so Fujishin took it on, learning the viticultural side of the business.

At the same time, Greg Koenig, owner of Koenig Vineyards (and Bitner’s winemaker) was looking for a cellar master, so Fujishin joined him, too.

“It worked out perfectly for me,” Fujishin said. “I couldn’t think of two better people to start in the industry with.”

Launching Fujishin Family Cellars



Martin Fujishin is the owner of Fujishin Family Cellars. His tasting room is an old fruit-packing shed on Sunny Slope Road. (Photo by Andy Perdue/Great Northwest Wine)

Fujishin wines are made at his own facility, though Fujishin continues as Koenig’s assistant winemaker, which includes making the wines for such wineries as Koenig, Bitner, Williamson and 3 Horse Ranch.

“It worked out great,” Fujishin said. “Greg’s an awesome guy to work with, and we have a great time.”

Right away, it was obvious to Koenig that Fujishin needed his own operation as a side gig.

“After I started working for Greg, we started getting into harvest,” he said. “I kept on saying, ‘Yeah, we should do this, we should do that, we should change this wine this way.’ He said, ‘You know what you need to have? You need to have your own winery.’”

So with Koenig’s help, Fujishin Family Cellars was born, starting out with a few hundred cases under the same roof as Koenig Vineyards. Today, most of the



Including Fujishin's time in the Koenig tasting room, the two have been working together for more than a dozen years.

"With our long relationship, we know how we both operate," he said. "We do somewhere between 50 and 70 wines a year together. Greg still makes all the big structural decisions. He's the stylistic force behind it, but I enjoy the logistics side of it, and I enjoy making sure the grapes show up when they're supposed to. It makes for a pretty good pairing."

While the Idaho wine industry was built on such varieties as Riesling, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, Fujishin chooses to stand out by working with varieties that are a little more rare. He makes Petite Sirah, Mourvèdre, Tempranillo and other varieties.

"I really find it much more fun and interesting to work with things that nobody else is doing," he said. "We love to just experiment."

Today, most of Fujishin's wines are sold at his tasting room in an old fruit-packing shed on Sunny Slope Road, not far from Ste. Chapelle and several other wineries overlooking the Snake River. It was built in 1943 by the Robison family and was used as a packing shed until 1967, when it became a storage facility. In 2000, the family refurbished the building and turned it into a fruit stand. In 2006, Fujishin took over the operation, ultimately converting it to his tasting room after the Robison family retired from the fruit business.

"It's a really neat location," he said. "It's got great character."

Fujishin Family Cellars takes on growers



Martin Fujishin adds clusters of Viognier to Syrah during harvest. The two grapes are co-fermented in the style of Côte-Rôtie in France's Northern Rhône Valley. (Photo by Andy Perdue/Great Northwest Wine)

This spring, Idaho approved the use of wine growers, which are refillable containers. Though some of the new law is still being ironed out, Fujishin was one of the first to take full advantage of it.

His growers are slightly smaller than a liter, roughly the equivalent of one-and-a-third bottles of wine. When customers come in, they can buy their first growler for \$25, which includes the vessel and the wine inside. When they bring it back to be refilled (Fujishin uses a keg for that) the cost is just \$13 – a great bargain considering the high quality of Fujishin's wine.

"A lot of customers come in every Friday to refill their wine for the weekend," Fujishin said. "That's a lot of fun for us to see."

In fact, that customer connection is what has helped make Fujishin Family Cellars successful so quickly. Nearly all of Fujishin's 2,000-case production is sold directly to consumers through the tasting room, which is open seven days a week.

“We’re not getting rich at it, but we’re definitely feeling like it’s been a great way to go,” he said. “People connect to the story. If you’re good at telling your story and you’re good at making that personal connection, people will come back. That’s what our focus has always been.”

Fujishin also has made that connection in the classroom. From 2009 to 2013, he taught viticulture and enology classes at Treasure Valley Community College. While he never figured he would be able to compete with the likes of Walla Walla Community College, he knew he could have an effect on the future of the Idaho wine industry.

“We tried to provide a little more of the viticultural education for people who wanted to work in vineyards and an entrepreneurial program for people who wanted to start their own wineries and vineyards.”

The program was run on a federal grant, and when that grant ran out, Fujishin went back to focusing all of his efforts on winemaking, growing Fujishin Family Cellars in the process. But now some of his former students are getting into the industry.

“It was fun to be a part of that educational experience. It was nice to help develop that culture.”

