

Grape Talk: Conversations with local winemakers



BY DEBBIE TOLLEFSON

When I was a young girl I developed a love affair with the muscat grape. My mother would create wonderful jelly from her own crop and I couldn't wait for the grapes to ripen. Flash forward and the grape in the form of wine has marked most special events in the lives of my husband and I by the bottle of wine that we drank and the friends with whom we shared it. We have tasted many amazing and some not-so-amazing wines over the years. I am not a sommelier or an enologist, but I have a great appreciation of wine and love to learn about it.

Upon settling in the Applegate Valley in 2004 we were thrilled to learn that this beautiful valley was also one of the new up-and-coming appellations.

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Rachel Martin of Red Lily Vineyards and Jim Devitt of Devitt Winery to discuss how they ended up in the Applegate Valley and how they approach their harvest and the creation of their wines.

How did you end up making wine in the Applegate Valley?

Rachel Martin, Red Lily Vineyards: My husband Les and I were both working in Las Vegas; he was a CPA and I was in criminal justice. We loved Spanish wines and dreamed of one day having a place to make our own. I am from Medford and my family is here, so we decided to take a leap of faith and move our family back here and go for it. Our first grapes were planted

on Thompson Creek and while they matured I immersed myself in learning as much as possible about winemaking. I worked with Michael Donovan and his winemaking team at Roxy Ann Winery and did a lot of work on learning the chemistry of winemaking. I also learned a lot from Sarah Powell, who taught me to be a critical taster. When I am out in the vineyards tasting the grapes, all this information comes into play when I am deciding when to harvest and the direction our wines will take.

Jim Devitt, Devitt Winery: I owned and operated Pope Valley Winery in Napa Valley from the early 1970s until the late 1990s. I couldn't stay away from winemaking so in 2003, we started Devitt here in the Applegate Valley and opened the tasting room in 2004. My son, who grew up working at Pope Valley Winery and went to the University of California, Davis, for viticulture and enology, is the winemaker and vineyard manager at Darioush Winery in Napa. We are currently collaborating on a wine system for filling wine barrels without overflowing and spilling. I have an engineering background that is being put to good use finding new systems for the wine industry.

What kind of varietals are you growing? Any new directions or experimentations with blends?

Rachel Martin: My dream was to create a great Spanish-style wine. I spent time in Spain learning and loving the

Spanish wines from the Rioja area made with tempranillo grapes. The wines that blew me away were made from 100 percent tempranillo grapes and they ripped your head off because they were so big and complex. Our Red Lily flagship wine is from our tempranillo grape and the 2012, which is in barrels right now, I think will be amazing. We just released our 2009, which was aged in French oak for 24 months, then bottle-aged, and I think very good. Besides tempranillo we are growing verdejo, a white grape, even though I never thought I would be making a white wine. We also grow some graciano grapes, which are great for blending because of their high acidity and great robust flavors, and grenache grapes that we use in our blend for Lily Girl Rosé. Right now our production is at 3,000 cases and our max will be 5,000 cases. We want to keep our operation small so we can control the process from the grape to the bottle. I will hold some batches back and experiment with the blends to try and create the best, most complex and enjoyable wine I can.

Jim Devitt: I have been concentrating on reds—mostly cabernet and syrah, but I have also been experimenting with viognier and blends of zinfandel, merlot and cabernet. I also experimented with a dessert wine, the 2007 Le Petite Oink When Pigs Fly. We age all our wines in French oak for 24 months at least, and some vintages for much longer. This year we are producing only 700 cases; in the past we have done between 2,500 and 3,000 cases.

We sell 85 percent of our wines at our tasting room and to local restaurants in Jacksonville. We want to keep our operation small and manageable.

I had a fun visit with these winemakers, who have a passion for wine and have made winemaking a family vocation. Rachael and Les Martin's family of three generations lives on the winery property; Jim Devitt's son has made his life about wine and grapes in the Napa Valley; and his grandson Brandon Butler is a winemaker at Devitt Winery.

Both winemakers agree that making wine is expensive, time-consuming and definitely not easy, but they love doing it in the Applegate Valley. Both Rachel and Jim believe that the Applegate Valley is becoming a major growth area for many varietals of US wines.

If you would like me to tackle a wine/grape topic, let me know by emailing gater@applegater.org.

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Note: Red Lily Vineyards is located at 11777 Highway 238 and is open daily from 11 am to 5 pm. The tasting room at Devitt Winery is at 11412 Highway 238 and is open daily from 12 to 5 pm. Both wineries are located between the towns of Ruch and Applegate in the Applegate Valley.

Photo, right:

Rachel Martin, owner and winemaker of Red Lily Vineyards.

Photo, far right:

Left to right, Brandon Butler, winemaker, Sue Devitt, and Jim Devitt, owner-winemaker of Devitt Winery.

Photos by Applegater staff.



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