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The buzz: Corliss Estates' debut is one to watch

By Paul Gregutt

Special to The Times

The magic happens annually. It has something to do with crush, and with autumn, and with the deluge of new releases that hit about this time each year. Suddenly, out of the dozens of wineries making their debut, one new Washington producer stands out from the pack, with wines that are polished, expressive and unique.

Three years ago it was Beresan, two years ago Fielding Hills. Last year it was a prerelease encounter with Chateau Rollat that rang my chimes. If you've followed those wineries, you have not only seen that the quality was no fluke; you've watched the national critics scramble to jump on board with their praise.

This year it seems certain to be Corliss Estates that makes a dramatic entrance with a stunning lineup of first releases. This is a long-awaited debut. Michael Corliss and Lauri Darneille purchased the 100-year-old former bakery building that houses their Walla Walla winery eight years ago and made their first wines there in 2003. Two previous vintages were made — and then discarded — elsewhere. The wines from 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 have never been seen.

Finally, that is about to change.

When I met Michael Corliss in late September, he and winemaker Kendall Mix were anchoring a lineup of a dozen or so workers painstakingly sorting grapes. Merlot from Corliss' Red Mountain vineyard was just coming in to the winery. The bunches of grapes passed through a gentle de-stemmer and poured out onto a conveyor belt, where every bit of leaf, stem and vineyard detritus was picked out by hand. By the time the grapes reached the end of the conveyor belt — just before being dropped (not pumped) into fermentation bins — they looked like perfect blueberries, each pristine grape isolated and unbroken.

This is what it takes to make great, not good wine. Good wines can take many shortcuts and still come out fine. Great wines cannot cut any corners. Corliss and Mix took a break to show me around the winery, and along the way explained why it has taken so very long to release any wines.

"I did not at the beginning fully envision that we'd be where we are today," Corliss admits. "It evolved along the way, which is a lot of the reason we've been pretty quiet — taking the journey. When you're on a journey," he continued, "you take a lot of notes and write it up when you finish. After eight years, we know very clearly where we're going. We have five great vintages that have been done here at the winery; we've purchased two estate vineyards, and we will acquire another in the next couple of years. We've got a cohesive team of people that have been working together for five years; and Kendall has been here for four of them."

Corliss is a fourth-generation Seattle native whose primary business is as a developer. He was introduced to great wines while still in his early 20s, as part of a group that purchased old wine cellars. He is certainly the only person I've ever known who owned and drank wines that once belonged to Alfred Hitchcock. Those classic, well-cellared wines shaped his palate, and when he embarked upon his own wine project, it was with the goal of making wines that would age gracefully.

"When you buy and typically drink much older wines, which is what I do, your interest is in how the wine will taste in five, 10 and 20 years," says Corliss. "It is more challenging to set out to build a wine that can last that long."

Corliss and Darneille have the financial resources to manage every aspect of the process. The Red Mountain vineyard, purchased two years ago, dates back to the late 1980s. Their Walla Walla vineyard was planted in 2001, and grapes have previously gone into some outstanding wines from Nicholas Cole. A new 100-plus-acre vineyard on Red Mountain

will be planted next spring.

The winery, in a beautifully refurbished brick building just off the freeway in downtown Walla Walla, is designed to make wines with minimal intervention. Blending trials begin at the end of the first year and continue until bottling two years later. This month, the first wines — a red blend, a cabernet sauvignon and a syrah, all from 2003 — are being offered to mailing list customers and a few select wine shops. Visit <http://www.corlissestates.com/> for further information.

When prodded, Corliss modestly admits: "I'm very happy with these wines. It would be hard to express in words." No need to. They speak for themselves.

Update on Chateau Rollat: The third of the winery's reds has been released, and it's a jewel. The 2006 Sophie de Rollat (\$29) is charming and accessible, a blend of 50 percent merlot, 40 percent cabernet sauvignon and 10 percent cabernet franc. The focus is on cranberry and raspberry fruits, tart and well-defined. It's a perfect choice for autumnal foods. See this week's Picks for an even better surprise.

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