

Corliss Estates unveils Walla Walla winery

By Teri Citterman, Wine Press Northwest

For years, people entering downtown Walla Walla, Wash., from Highway 12 drove past the secretive winery and wondered when it would open.

On "Leonetti Weekend," otherwise known as Walla Walla's spring release weekend, Corliss Estates finally unlocked its doors to guests five years after hiring its winemaker.

Why so long? Michael Corliss and Lauri Darneille believe that good things come to those who wait.

Anticipating greatness, customers picked up their allocation of 2004 Syrah. From the peppery darkness of the wine to the sparkling light of the Phantom of the Opera chandelier, everything had its place. And no one was disappointed.

A sense of place, in fact, is a defining premise on which the wines, vineyards and winery are rooted. The couple's muse resulted from their love of wine and their world-wide travels to those wine regions. They took the qualities of each winery and region they visited. They blended them with the relationships they've established and used the knowledge to lay their groundwork.

"You take a little piece of all those places," Corliss said.

The challenge was melding those pieces into a new winery in an emerging region. So they set out to build the right team of people, those who could work in Walla Walla and build upon the European model in which one generation follows its forefathers. Already, the two oldest of five children have expressed interest in furthering their wine knowledge.

In 2004, they added Kendall Mix as winemaker. The team began to gel in an environment based on uncompromising excellence, not short-term cashflow. This perspective relates directly to the couple's core business - commercial development, an industry that requires patience, planning and long-term investment.

"We think in 20- and 40-year periods," Corliss said. "When you have datapoints at 10 and 20 years, you have a different perspective."

The proof will be in the bottle.

"What's important to me is consistency, quality and character of the wines we're producing," he said.

And there is no rush to the market place. Wines receive at least two years of aging in the bottle. In fact, Corliss Estates released its first vintage - 2003 - in 2008. This year, the 2004s emerged.

"Because we take our time, we know what we have in the bottle," Darneille said.

Patience and precision is employed in their vineyard practices, too. Corliss said, "That often amounts to digging holes and tasting a lot of dirt."

They've spent the past two years doing just that with their newest vineyard on Red Mountain. The parcel, purchased from Mike Moore of Blackwood Canyon, never had been planted until 2009.

Portions of it will remain in the natural shrub-steppe and surround the vines. About 50 percent of the vineyard is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon because of soil depth. Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Merlot and Petit Verdot as well as Rhone varieties Cinsault, Grenache, Mourvedre and Syrah make up the other half of the vineyard. Corliss Estates also owns another Red Mountain vineyard and a third in Walla Walla.

Meanwhile, Tranche Cellars is the family's white wine project, and the 2005 Chardonnay, 2006 Pinot Gris and 2007 Viognier-Roussanne were released in 2009.

"We like white wine, and early on we started making it in our facility for ourselves," Corliss said. "Friends said, 'Your wine is pretty damn good, why not sell it?' "

And here they are.

"Lauri and I drink wines that are a minimum of 10 years old, and most of them are 20 years old," he said. "We want people to be happy with the quality of our wines in 10, 20 and 30 years."

Time will tell.