

Family makes switch from tree fruit to vineyards

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

MARSING, Idaho — The Williamson family has grown tree fruit for four generations, but now the orchard is transitioning to vineyards.

“My cousin Patrick, my sister Beverly and I took over management from my father Roger and Patrick’s father John. Before them it was my grandfather John, and he took over from his uncle Henry Williamson,” Michael Williamson said.

Their orchards have done well over the years, but now they are making the switch to winemaking. They started planting vineyards in 1998.

“We’ve cut back a lot of our fruit, though we still have a few peaches, cherries and apricots. Our main focus now is wines,” he said.

The focus for their prod-



Courtesy of Williamson Family
From left, Michael, Beverly and Patrick Williamson represent the fourth generation to manage the family business.

ucts has always been flavor. “Customers at our fruit stands were always telling us our fruit tastes the best. Flavor is what wine is all about, so we thought we could also

grow good wine grapes,” Williamson explained.

The climate and soil are perfect on the Sunnyslope for growing fruit or grapes. “For wine, you definitely want the

right soil and terrain. You don’t want a heavy soil that retains moisture; you want the water to drain out. ... We don’t get much rain, which is great because we can stress the plants just a little and reduce the amount of growth that goes into leaves and vines. We can control the amount of water with our drip irrigation.”

In this high desert climate, moisture can be perfectly controlled, and this is what gives unique flavors to the wine that other climates cannot. “We can obtain a little higher acidity, which adds a nice balance to the flavor,” he said.

“We also get the contrast of hot days and cool nights during their ripening period in the fall. This helps build sugars (in fruit crops or grapes) in the daytime with photosynthesis and then at night it cools down and holds onto the acidity — so you get a nice

balance of sweet and crisp.” When the Williamsons planted their first vines, Ste. Chappelle — the biggest winery in Idaho — was offering contracts to growers.

“They talked to us and we showed them some of our ground and they thought it would be great for grapes. Our smaller orchard equipment matches what we needed for vineyards and we also had the necessary labor

pool. So we started growing for Ste. Chappelle and then planted more than our contract.”

The Williamsons decided to make some wine themselves with the additional grapes and talked with a new local winemaker at that time, Greg Koenig. “He looked at our vines and thought they were great, and decided to make wine for us,” Williamson said.

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