

From engineer to wine producer

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

The conversion of a poultry barn into a winery is not as dramatic as the life change Sean Driggers underwent in his quest to make fine wine.

Pudding River Wine Cellars east of Salem originated on property Driggers' in-laws, John and Karen Bateman, purchased 20 years ago. In 2004 Driggers, an avid wine enthusiast, helped them put in a vineyard.

Before that, Driggers and his wife, Stacey, lived in Seattle, he a mechanical engineer in telecommunications and she an Intel engineer. Stacey's job transferred, but the prospect of starting from scratch made Sean see red — and white — and he took the plunge into commercial wine-making.

In its 10 years, Pudding River Wine Cellars has made a splash with its small-lot, boutique wines and makes custom wine for half a dozen other producers.

Driggers has high praise for Chemeketa Community College's viticulture school he and his father-in-law attended in 2005. Driggers went on to attend CCC's

winemaking school.

"It was a consuming hobby for 15 years, but nothing beats going to school," he said. "At school I learned everything I needed to know for making wine."

First harvest was in 2006, and the whole family took part in launching the venture.

"It's just me now," he said. "I run the tasting room, do all the books, labor, festivals, marketing and events in addition to the vineyard and making the wine."

Production has multiplied several times and the winery, set up for 3,000 cases a year, is now producing 5,000.

"It's a lot of cycles," Driggers said. "I employ more farm labor. We worked the vines by ourselves the first couple years and it about killed us."

The winery broke even its third year and started turning a profit in the seventh year.

In the process Driggers has learned it's best to "celebrate" the capriciousness of Mother Nature.

"Oregon has some pretty variable vintages; upstarts are always at risk," Driggers said. "September of 2013 a typhoon came through here and dumped 7 inches of rain in a



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Sean Driggers in the tasting room at Pudding River Wine Cellars. At 10 years the winery is producing about 5,000 cases a year.

week-and-a-half."

Back at the winery, Driggers says the key to exceptional wine lies in its barreling.

"It's a nuance; like adding a spice, and I think that's where winemakers get to use their genius," he said. "I learned from some key people over the years and it has become one of my specialties."

The varieties aged in oak are put in barrels whose insides have been charred to a certain "toast level." The residual charcoal mellows out the wood so the wine "doesn't taste like wood" and makes for buttery, sweeter wines more like their French counterparts.

"...But that effect lasts only a year, two at the most," Driggers said. "If you want that flavor; that spice, you have to use new barrels every year and figure out what you want to use for each wine."

"We're getting a good reputation for that," he added. "We won a gold ribbon at the Oregon State Fair in 2007 for our Pinot gris and every year after that have not been able to make enough."

"I've almost stopped doing the competitions anymore with the increasing wine tourism," Driggers said. "People from all over the country come to this area already knowing which wineries they're going to visit."



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Sean Driggers operates Pudding River Wine Cellars near Salem, Ore. Though much of his wine is aged in stainless steel barrels, Driggers also specializes in oak barreling and the endless flavor nuances it affords.

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