

HAT Ranch

Location: Caldwell, Idaho

Established: 2014

Owners: Tim and Helen Harless



High-Demand Training Opportunities

Viticulture Sustainability Wine Business Entrepreneurship

Yakima Valley College in partnership with South Seattle College and Wenatchee Valley College are providing new educational opportunities to meet industry job growth.

The Pacific Northwest Wine Education Collaborative Grant designed one-year certificate programs to provide technical and science-based education through online courses and hands-on learning opportunities.

Classes Begin Fall 2017

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V16-4/#6

Pilot lands new career as Idaho winemaker

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

For Tim Harless, a veteran Air Force and commercial pilot, making premium wines is the result of a life-long love of exploration and experimentation.

In 2002 his interest in wine was sparked after visiting a wine bar near Dallas, Texas. After being exposed to several varietals and noting the distinctions between the wines he was tasting, he became intrigued. He studied the differences in the world's wines and decided to become a winemaker.

"Many people enter the wine world sideways from other paths. I took an adult certificate program in winemaking, Viticulture and Enology at Grayson County Community College in Texas," he said. "These courses were designed for working professionals, held all day Fridays and Saturdays."

He took a couple years to get through it, and went to California during vacation to work during a crush — when the grapes are harvested. Then in 2011 and 2012 he worked alongside the former owners at Vale Wine Co.

For his own winery, he combined family heritage in the labeling of his product. The HAT Ranch label harks back to great-grandparents Jake and Margarette Frison, who homesteaded in Wyoming in 1902 and started the HAT Ranch, eventually running 1,700 head of cattle. Their brand was the shape of a cowboy hat.

Inspired by pioneering ancestors, Harless and his wife, Helen, followed suit by choosing Idaho, the new frontier of the wine industry, as their winemaking homestead.

"We looked around Washington, Oregon and Califor-



Courtesy of Hat Ranch Winery
Hat Ranch Winery owners Helen and Tim Harless are seen in the vineyard.

nia. We made a trip to Idaho, tasted some of the wines and realized there was tremendous potential here; the climate is similar to Eastern Washington where there are so many vineyards," he said.

"We produced our wine for the first couple years at the Vale Wine Co. facility, then bought their production equipment and label. We continue making their label, plus some of our own," Harless said.

Helen's previous two-year experience managing the wine cellar and organizing tastings for Wine Spectator magazine exposed her to the world's top wines. She became the "palate" for their winery.

Together they knew they had a shot at producing great wines.

Their wine-production facility is located at the University of Idaho Business Incubator, and the tasting room is on Plum Road on the Sunnyslope Wine Trail.

"This has become a popular area for wineries, since most of the grapes in Idaho are grown here," Harless said.

"Many things must come together to make wine, including a good location if you sell wine. You need to be on a road where people can find you," he said.

The wine business was already established in the area, with Ste. Chappelle, Williamson, Fujishin, Huston, Bitner and Koenig.

"We grow some of our own Muscat grapes, which we produce into a dry Moscato which last year won the Idaho Best Show award," he said. "We'll also have Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc this year."

HAT Ranch is expanding varieties and quantity, and also buys from Skyline and Sawtooth Vineyards, one of the biggest in Idaho.

Helen is a dentist, but involved with the winery doing marketing and social media. The team includes the tasting room staff and Cellarmaster Will Wetmore.

HAT Ranch produces about 1,500 cases annually, with plans to increase to 3,000.

"We make classic varietals like Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah under the Vale label and unoaked Chardonnay, dry Moscato, white blends and red blends under the HAT Ranch label."

Most of their wine is sold directly to consumers through their tasting room, and about 25 percent to restaurants, wine shops, the Boise Co-op and Whole Foods, but some people have also found them online.