

Walla Walla Vintners a Washington pioneer

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

It all began in 1981 when Gordy Venneri and Myles Anderson began making home-made wine. Venneri is a second-generation Walla Walla, Wash., native whose roots go back to the small Italian village of Serra Pedace.

"After a trip to Italy, I got the wine 'bug' and enjoyed having table wine with meals," he said. It was a life-changing visit to meet his Italian relatives.

When he got home, he looked for wine grapes so he could make a barrel of wine for home use. He and Myles Anderson, a fellow teacher at Walla Walla Community College, started making wine for fun.

"I found some guys who had planted wine grapes and talked them into selling us 1,000 pounds of grapes, so



Courtesy of Walla Walla Vintners

From left, Scott Haladay, Myles Anderson and Gordy Venneri. What started as a hobby eventually turned into Walla Walla Vintners, among the first wineries in the Walla Walla, Wash., area.

we could make small batches of homemade wine. That little hobby went on for 14 years," Venneri said.

They experimented and expanded their wines and in

1995 made their first commercial wines. They launched Walla Walla Vintners — with 675 cases of wine — as the eighth winery in Walla Walla.

The wine business has blossomed.

"It took 17 years to get from the first commercial winery in 1978, to the eighth (our winery) in 1995. Now it's gone from 8 to over 120 wineries just in the Walla Walla area alone and 900 in the state of Washington — plus Oregon, Idaho and British Columbia," he said.

"After small beginnings, our winery earned a reputation for traditionally crafted, elegant wines served in a beautiful rustic and friendly setting on a plateau in the shadow of the Blue Moun-

tains. Our logo is a red barn, which is on our label."

He wanted an image that fit the landscape.

"You wouldn't want a French chateau in the middle of farm country. So we built traditional-looking buildings that fit the farming, haying, and cow country of Eastern Washington. We are real people who happen to make wine, this appeals to ordinary people. Our market is the Northwest and West Coast and we want to fit our agricultural traditions," Venneri said.

Walla Walla was a sleepy little farm town, then tourism became an important component. "This meant wineries, hotels, restaurants, vacation rentals, real estate businesses, people buying second homes in Walla Walla, coming from Seattle, Boise and other big cities," he said.

Venneri grew up here, went to college, and came back.

"I've seen the town change a lot in 60 years. We still have traditional agriculture, but the wine industry is the new kid on the block. This industry has three phases — grape growing, wine production, and tourism. Some areas just grow grapes and make wine, but we have all three," he explained.

"Our winery started out buying grapes from growers

and making blends. We still do that, but also have 11 acres of our own estate grapes. Now we market 6,000 to 8,000 cases of wine annually," said Venneri.

The wines include Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Sangiovese. About 70 percent of these wines are marketed directly to consumers through the tasting room at the winery, their wine club or e-commerce. About 30 percent is sold wholesale to restaurants and wine shops — directly or through distributors in California, Oregon, Montana, Idaho and a couple small distributors in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

When Anderson retired from winemaking in February 2017, the Haladay family became co-owners of Walla Walla Vintners. Scott Haladay became general manager. Venneri still directs wine-making and grower relations, while Haladay oversees strategy, marketing and sales.

Anderson was inducted into the Legends of Washington Wine Hall of Fame in 2011 and awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers in 2014. He helped create the Institute for Enology and Viticulture at Walla Walla Community College. He and Venneri assisted other wineries as they were getting started and were named "2016 Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year" by Wine Press Northwest.

When Anderson decided to retire, Venneri searched for a partner with business experience and skills that would complement winery operations, logistics and customer service.

Scott Haladay and his wife, Nici are looking forward to raising their young family in Walla Walla.

"Our plans include refreshing our packaging, updating our red barn tasting room and adding outdoor entertaining space," said Venneri.

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