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Arena Valley Vineyard: Sells grapes to other wineries and makes its own wine

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

Scott DeSeelhorst owns and operates Arena Valley Vineyard between Wilder and Parma, Idaho. It is an area known for its mild climate and sandy loam soils — perfect for grapes.

“My wife, Susan, and I bought this 90-acre property in 1998,” he said. “Currently, 70 acres are planted with another 6 acres scheduled to be planted.

“We were living in Utah, but my wife’s family is from Idaho. I fell in love with Idaho and looked for something to do up here. My background was in restaurant,” he said. “I understood that end of the wine business but had no farm experience.”

He decided to try grape-growing and asked a friend in real estate to look for a 10-acre south-facing hillside that could be planted.

“That’s all I thought I could plant, and this was all I knew about grapevines,” Scott said. “He found a 75-acre vineyard that might be for sale and I jumped right in.”

The grapes were under contract to Ste. Chapelle. He continued with that market until he and Susan built their winery.

The vineyard was originally planted in 1983 with 4 varietals — Cabernet, Merlot, Chardonnay and Riesling.

“We started pulling out some of the Chardonnay and Riesling and started planting different varietals. We started with small blocks of different varietals to see what would do well here,” Scott said.

“Back then, there weren’t very many different ones being planted. We now have 20 different varietals. We make wine from some and sell some to other



Scott DeSeelhorst works on his Arena Valley Vineyard.

wineries,” he said.

Their label is Snake River Winery.

The grapes that do well on this site are Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc.

“I’m also excited about some new Italian varietals — a white called Arneis and a rustic red Montepulciano,” he said. “Also, Tempranillo and Viognier do well for us.”

Chardonnay is one of their biggest sellers, because most customers are familiar with it.

“In the vineyard we use sustainable farming practices and haven’t used chemicals like Roundup for at least 10 years. We take a very natural approach, which means a lot of hand work,” said Scott.

The vineyard has a crew of employees and uses seasonal contract labor during pruning and harvest.

“It requires a lot of bodies to pick grapes,” he said. “Many vineyards have gone to mechanical harvesters and we went that route for a while, but are now doing it all by hand.”

The vineyard is on a slope, which is important in Idaho, where there is always a risk of spring and fall frost. Colder air tends to settle into low areas, so being on a slope helps keep the vines a little warmer.

“I’ve learned to plant the later-ripening varietals on the top of the slope and

early-ripening ones down toward the valley and in the depressions,” he said. “We are 2,300 feet elevation, about 1,000 feet higher than the Walla Walla vineyards. Being this much higher has more risk for cold temperatures, but the cooler nights produce a higher natural level of acidity in the grapes.”

In some of the lower, hotter regions such as California, winemakers must add tartaric or citric acid because they can’t get that natural effect.

There are many tricks to growing grapes.

“We’ve learned how to prune them differently. Some late-ripening grapes, like Barbera, have super-high natural acidity. When deciding when to pick, we are mostly looking at sugar content and acidity; with the Barbera we have to wait for acidity to drop to acceptable level,” he said. “We prune it differently — to have fewer clusters per vine. I get low tonnage per acre, but this helps ensure they’ll ripen.”

This puts the energy of the plant into fewer grapes and they ripen quicker.

“Other grapes, like Chardonnay, ripen earlier so we can hang a heavier crop load on those,” he said. “It’s little things like this we’ve learned along the way, as we’ve gotten to know the grapes, the different varietals and how to treat them.”