

Clearwater Canyon Wines: Using science to create 'liquid art'

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

LEWISTON, Idaho — Family roots run deep in this vineyard and winery in northern Idaho.

“My family purchased this ground in 1916. I am fourth generation and our daughter is fifth generation. I grew up in Boise but spent summers here with my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins on the farm and loved it,” said Coco Umiker, who with her husband, Karl, owns Clearwater Canyon wines.

“Four years after my great grandpa purchased this farm, he died and left my great grandmother with four kids and a big mortgage,” she said. “She was a tough lady; she ran the farm, raised the kids and never remarried. She stayed here until she died at age 93.”

She had 3 girls and a boy — Coco’s grandfather.

“She put them all through college, and they all got teaching certificates,” Coco said.

“My grandparents had four kids, none of whom were interested in farming as a career, but my mom and aunt helped oversee the operations after he retired,” she said.

“Then my husband and I came along and started asking Grandpa if we could convert some of the land



Karl and Coco Umiker of Clearwater Canyon Cellars near Lewiston, Idaho.

Richard Duval

into a vineyard,” Coco said.

He rented them a quarter-acre to give it a try.

“Karl and I planted vines in 2003 and started Clearwater Canyon Cellars in 2004,” she said. “We initially used fruit from Phinny Hill in the Horse Heaven Hills of Washington, and slowly grew our business.”

Their first vintage was four barrels, in 2004. Coco juggled winemaking and working 100 miles away as an enologist at Whitman Cellars in Walla Walla,

Wash.

Each year they made more wine and slowly expanded. Now they produce about 5,000 cases a year, and the vineyard is about 7 acres.

“We made wine in a garage for three years. Then we moved the operation to the Port of Lewiston. We rented space there for nine years and eventually got enough money together to build a facility here, next to the vineyard and our house,” Coco said.

It’s been a long road, but a good one, as they grew the business and finished their educations.

Karl finished his master’s degree in soils at the University of Idaho. He has an undergrad degree in chemistry.

Coco finished a degree in microbiology, molecular biology and biochemistry and started working on her Ph.D. in 2005. She received her doctorate at Washington State University within the enology and

viticulture program.

She is a wine microbiologist who specializes in wine spoilage microorganisms. Her doctoral research was on the factors affecting culturability, viability and filterability of *Dekkera bruxellensis*, a spoilage yeast, in red wine.

She also considers herself an artist who uses the natural environment and an understanding of wine science to craft grapes into “liquid art.” She sees each vintage as an opportunity to



Clearwater Canyon wine.

explore wine characteristics that are unique to that year.

She met Karl at the University of Idaho.

“We met because we shared a love for bicycles and only later realized we had a lot of other things in common — as we were peddling around and going to bike races,” Coco said.

Karl grew up in Arkansas racing mountain bikes.

Karl and Coco now have three full-time employees.

Sara Wilson is a lifelong friend who is now their wine club manager — which is how 90% of their wine is sold.

Mike Haberman is their cellar master and viticulturist, and Karen Schmidt is the tasting room and wholesale manager.

“She’s new to the team but not new to our lives, as she’s been a friend for a long time,” said Coco.



WACKER NEUSON
all it takes!



RICKREALL
Since 1947
Farm Supply
503-623-2365












5226625-1