

Vitis Ridge Winery & Meridian Estate Vineyard: From geology to viticulture

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

SILVERTON, Ore. — You might say Chris Deckelmann's career path came out of left field.

After graduating in geology, Deckelmann became an exploration geologist in Alaska, but once he married, being away from home four months a year lost its appeal.

He returned to the Silverton area and went to work for Kraemer Farms in Mt. Angel.

"I was out there hoeing broccoli or working in the strawberries, which they probably had more of than anybody in the Willamette Valley," Deckelmann said. "A college degree and I was just out there in the fields with my dog, doing piecemeal."

Then in the late 1970s Kraemer Farms bought an 11-acre vineyard, their first.

"I started learning about grapes because they told me to take it over," Deckelmann said. "They didn't know anything about it; I didn't know anything about it; and we didn't have Google, but they were so nice. They'd send me down to (the University of California-Davis) for seminars and that's where I got my start."

Some 40 years later, Kraemer Farms has some of the largest vineyards in the area and Deckelmann and his wife Sharon have a brisk business of their own.

Deckelmann started planting his own vines in 1992. He was one of the first in Oregon to plant Marechal Foch, a French-American hybrid with red skin and red flesh, and was at one point its largest producer in the U.S.

"It's very dark in color; a little more herbal; a little more mineral," tasting room manager Brian Everest said. "We sell a lot of it to places that will add it to Pinot noir or even cabs to boost color and flavor."



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

Chris Deckelmann visits with wine tasters at Vitis Ridge Winery.

He owns 70 acres of vineyards and, with son Brian Deckelmann, manages another 300 acres in the area. About 95% of his fruit is sold to other wineries.

Deckelmann had been a hobby winemaker for 20 years before opening Vitis Ridge Winery in 2003.

Being in the thick of the wildfires, 2020 was a low production year, but last year Vitis Ridge produced about 2,200 cases as well as "bulk-out" wine.

This year, with bringing in some fruit from other regions, they've cellared about 3,800

cases of wine in several varieties.

"A nice thing about having so many varieties is that we get a lot of people that have no experience wine tasting," Everest said. "A lot of folks want to start with sweeter wines, but I try and get them to run the gamut."

"I have them smell it first; then look at it for visual clues, such as legs or banding on the surface," Everest said. "When you taste it, you're trying to identify three things: a fruit, a spice and then one last thing, such as what the finish is like."

Basalt Cellars: Growers put their vineyards together

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

CLARKSTON, Wash. — Business partners Rick Wasem and Lynn DeVleming have vineyards near Clarkston, Wash., and founded Basalt Cellars in 2003.

"Clarkston was a big grape-growing area 130 years ago — originally called Vineland because there were so many grapevines," Rick said, adding that the local cemetery is still called Vineland Cemetery.

"My great-grandfather had a vineyard here in the early 1900s," he said.

Rick's vineyard is on 8.5 acres on a steep slope above the Snake River.

"This slope is good for quality grapes, but it's hard to take care of them," he said.

He is a pharmacist and has a chemistry background.

"I got the vineyard started in 1997 and kept adding to it over the next 12 years," he says. It's now 4 acres.

"My vineyard is only 900 feet above sea level. In our area we get about 12 inches



Basalt Cellars

Rick Wasem and Lynn DeVleming of Basalt Cellars near Clarkston, Wash.

of rain, but my vineyard gets about 9 inches," he said.

Grapes like heat, and when temperatures get up around 100 degrees there's less risk for diseases.

"It keeps the canopy dry inside," he said.

Last year, however, was a different story.

"We had early heat, however," he said. "It was 120 degrees the end of June and shut down development. The grapes never got very big. Crops here were about 60% of normal."

He grows mostly red wine grapes, and has the typical Bordeaux varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot. Some of these are used in a vineyard blend.

He also has some Rhone varieties such as Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre, which he blends.

Lynn has about 3 acres of Bordeaux red grapes.

"We use all of hers and mine, and also have some contracts with high-end growers around the state," Rick said.

"We produce about 2,000 cases of wine, and most sales are through our tasting room, direct to customers. We also distribute through north Idaho and Montana and ship wine to 42 states."

For a small winery, Basalt has a good following, he said.

"Our prices are on the low side for Washington state, partly because we are not in Walla Walla or Woodinville, the two big wine village areas. We price wine for our own community," he said.

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