

Wine's not all white; nor is the industry

Documentary about minority winemakers challenges stereotypes about Oregon's largely white wine scene

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

When Bertony Faustin started making wine in 2008, he became the first black winemaker on record in Oregon. Being a trailblazer, he says, has its advantages and its challenges.

On a sunny and parched Sunday afternoon in July, Faustin stood behind his tasting room bar in North Plains, about 20 minutes northwest of Portland, waiting for the arrival of curious wine drinkers interested in sampling his line of Abbey Creek wines.

The Roots played on the stereo system, while Faustin stood tall, sporting designer jeans and loud, luminous, primary-color blue Adidas sneakers. A simple black T-shirt revealed a tattoo sleeve on his right arm — a tribal design of his wine label's logo.

Faustin is not your typical vintner.

On this day, he offered a \$10 tasting four wines, including his Juicy Fruit pinot gris with hints of Asian pear, and the Melange Noir, a 2013 red blend he serves with a chocolate truffle.

With a broad smile and welcoming tone, he cheerfully greeted two young women from Beaverton who say they go wine tasting frequently. The women both carried Coach bags, both had medium-long, dark blond hair, and when asked, both — without hesitation — said they were surprised to be greeted by a black man when they first walked in.

"It was probably even more shocking," added one of the visitors, "that he was not just a pourer, but he is actually a winemaker."

It's a reaction Faustin knows well.

The uniqueness of being a minority winemaker in Oregon makes Faustin memorable, and it makes him stand out — advantages in a competitive industry.

But getting past his customers' and peers' initial disbelief, he says, gets old.

Common questions range from "How'd you get the business?" to "Are you really the owner?"

"Why is it so hard to believe I am the winemaker? That I did start the label?" asks Faustin. "Every day — it starts to build and build."

Faustin says he didn't want to be known as "the black winemaker" — he wanted to be known for the quality of his wine. But after nearly eight years in the business, it was becoming increasingly apparent to him that minority winemakers needed more visibility in the industry.

But how do you change the perception that winemaking and tasting can cross into other demographics in Oregon's predominantly affluent, white wine scene?

Faustin and Ocean Yap-Powell, his 25-year-old assistant of Chinese, Hawaiian and Norwegian descent, had been discussing how to explain what it means to be a person of color in the wine industry for some time.

"I've noticed when I'm doing the tastings," says Yap-Powell, "people have an easier time assuming that I'm the owner



Bertony Faustin, owner of Abbey Creek Vineyard, on set during the filming of "Red, White and Black," a documentary about minority winemakers in Oregon. PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ



Director Jerry Bell Jr. (right) checks lighting for an interview session during filming in late July. PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

and I'm the winemaker — even though I do look very young, and even though Tony (Faustin) is right there. When Tony is doing the tastings, they don't ever assume that. They just ask, "Who owns Abbey Creek?"

One day in May, as Faustin pulled leaves from the rapidly spouting springtime shoots of his grape vines, he decided he was ready to step up and create the visibility that was sorely needed among Oregon's minority winemakers.

He was going to make a documentary film.

Wine tasting fundraiser

WHAT: Wine tasting featuring wineries in the documentary "Red, White and Black" (small bites will be provided)

WHEN: 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 13

WHERE: Hip Chicks Do Wine Tasting Room, 4510 SE 23rd Ave., Portland

COST: \$20; proceeds go toward completion of the film

"I think he just got tired and was ready to be that voice — to be that face," Yap-Powell says.

The documentary is aptly titled "Red, White and Black," with an expected release date in 2016 — if Faustin can secure the rest of the \$25,000 he needs to finish it. He's already contributed \$1,500 of his own money to the project. A wine tasting event at Hip Chicks Do Wine in Portland from 6 to 8 p.m. Aug. 13 will kick off the Indiegogo crowdfunding drive, and proceeds from the \$20 tasting will go to support the film. Wines from all the vintners featured in

"Red, White and Black" will be available for tasting, and small bites will be provided.

For him, the film project is about "empowerment." He says he wants people of color to understand there are people that look like them making and enjoying wine in Oregon, and he hopes that realization will encourage a more diverse range of people to go wine tasting and consider careers in the industry.

He says it's like the United States presidency.

"When I grew up, I never thought about it. All the presidents I knew were white," he says. "But my kids now — I hope not — but they could potentially want to go be president because it happened. Now they can relate."

"To me, the wine industry is a hustle," Faustin says. In his former life, he worked as an anesthesia technician at Oregon Heath & Science University, but he says he came to a turning point in his life where he wanted to do something else. His in-laws owned 50 acres on Germantown Road, with 15 acres of southern-facing grape vines.

"I looked around and thought, I'm gonna start making wine," he says.

Faustin says minorities "easily make up less than 1 percent of winemakers" at Oregon's 600-plus wine labels.

Just minutes from his own vineyard sits Seven Sails, a boutique winery specializing in a sweet, fruity pinto gris with a dry finish.