



LAURA AND MICAH BODNER AT THEIR PLEASANT HILL WINERY

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Less is More

Bodner Wine Co. will make no wine before there's room BY PATRICK JAMES

Micah and Laura Bodner's winery could fit in your garage, if your garage had a little more head space for punching down a 1,000-liter open-top tank. To facilitate the dynamic process of opening a winery, the Bodners first needed leverage. So they removed the ceiling in a barn and squeezed in equipment wherever it would fit.

The barrels and tanks in the Bodner's barn occupy the same small compartment; the destemmer (no crusher), presses, bins and stainless-steel vessels are stored in the corner opposite the chemistry lab; the office also serves as a cellar and cold-fermentation room. And all of this makes up Bodner Wine Co., located in Pleasant Hill behind Laura's parents' house.

In a highly competitive industry where quantity, price and name-recognition can often dictate the market quality of popular labels, microwineries (or nanowineries) with limited production capability have the freedom — and incur all the risks — of making atypical wines. The Bodners are limited in production, growing slowly to ensure quality in their wine as well as in their investment. In other words, they can't afford to produce more wine than they already do.

Currently the Bodners have released only one bottling of their wine, 60 cases of Willamette Valley Pinot Noir from 2010 — a tough year to start by industry standards, as the cool weather forced grape-growers to pick earlier or later than was ideal.

But the Bodners have no vineyards of their own. They purchase grapes from small Roncalli and Herberson vineyards and then bring them to their tiny winery instead of processing them at an estate. Just to house a facility for alcohol production — and then to legally sell the alcohol — the Bodners had to jump through myriad county, state and federally mandated hoops to bond and establish their winery.

"Then we started acquiring equipment as cheaply as possible," Micah says. The pump for moving and racking wine off the lees was purchased used from Noble Estate Winery; the barrels for aging were recycled, scraped and custom toasted by Re:Wine in Eugene to impart a one-third "new" French oak character in their wine. Also, before the Bodners were able to acquire a newer, gentler bladder press, the first vintage was loaned to them by Bodner the elder. Most important, however, was gathering information.

Micah Bodner grew up out Lost Creek on a 56-acre family farm, five acres of which were planted with native grapes

(Glenora, Aurora, Lakemont) and used for home fermentation. But a few years ago, after deciding to pursue commercial winemaking — and while Micah was finishing graduate chemistry studies in Baltimore — the Bodners began to research large-scale vinification techniques from online UC-Davis curricula. After returning to Oregon and sorting out the fiscal and physical potentialities for production, the Bodners traveled to Napa to glean what *not* to do when making wine.

In true P-Hill fashion, the Bodners camped out and hiked between wineries during the day. "People in huge SUVs were looking at us like, 'What are those crazy people doing?'" Laura recalls. Underground investigation, tasting wines and then trying to sneak back into the production facilities for a peek at the works were all activities that helped the couple realize they wanted to make the opposite of "over-oaked, over-ripe, flabby, fruity wine that so many people enjoy," Micah explains. "We make the wine we like, and we have the freedom to do it."

And what the Bodners like is a delicate, aromatic, light-bodied Burgundian-style wine with an emphasis on terroir (the characteristic of a particular geography and climate). Drinking it is like tasting dirt and sweat (in a good way) and inhaling the fruits of labor.

To own and manage a business is a series of full-time jobs, and with Laura pregnant and selling real estate, and Micah researching medical chemistry at UO, time is at a premium. And the Bodners are farmers as well.

Nearby Zephyr Ridge Vineyard, just down the road from the winery, is planted with 250 Riesling vines that are a quarter-century old. In 2010, that particular Riesling, the Bodner's first vintage, proved unusable. After a year of work — tending, pruning and spraying organic sulfur and milk on the plants and soil — the Bodners were able to nurse to health and harvest from the vines nearly a ton of 5- to 10-percent botrytized grapes (grapes infected with a benevolent fungus named Noble rot). This hard work resulted in a freshly bottled German-style Riesling — off-dry apple, mineral backbone, low alcohol — to the tune of 30 cases.

"Our first year goal was to make good pinot," Micah says, "then slowly branch out with other varietals and quantities. We want to control our production to make wine that is different from anywhere else." ❖

Bodner Winery is located at 85151 Ridgeway Rd. in Pleasant Hill; for further information about Bodner Wine Co., visit bodnerwinecompany.com

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