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To make a small fortune in the wine business, the old saw goes, start with a large one. In Washington, few if any new winery enterprises start with any sort of fortune at all, except perhaps misfortune.

Corporations have deep pockets, to be sure, but by and large they launch brands, not wineries. Family-owned wineries are the rule here, not the exception, and according to one recent study, which claims that

250 (more than a third) of Washington's wineries produce fewer than 50 cases of wine annually, many are so tiny as to be essentially non-existent.

Corliss Estates is the big exception to all of the above. Family-owned, ambitiously expansive, with money seemingly no object, this unique project, which has been in development for almost a decade, will soon encompass three separate wineries – not brands, but actual wineries – and hundreds of acres of vineyard in Walla Walla, Red Mountain, and the Yakima Valley.

Owners Michael Corliss and Lauri Darneille purchased the 100-year-old former bakery building that houses their Walla Walla winery nine years ago, and actually made their first wines there in 2003. Two previous vintages had been made – and then discarded – elsewhere. The wines from 2003 were finally released last fall; 2004 wines are just now coming out; and 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008 are still in barrel and bottle.

When I met Michael Corliss in late September, he and winemaker Kendall Mix were anchoring a lineup of a dozen or so workers painstakingly sorting grapes. Merlot from Corliss' Red Mountain vineyard was just coming in to the winery. The bunches of grapes passed through a gentle de-stemmer and poured out onto a conveyer belt, where every bit of leaf, stem and vineyard detritus was picked out by hand. By the time the grapes reached the end of the conveyer belt – just before being dropped (not pumped) into fermentation bins – they looked like perfect blueberries, each pristine grape isolated and unbroken.

This is what it takes to make great, not good wine. Good wines can take many shortcuts and still come out fine. Great wines cannot cut any corners. Corliss and Mix took a break to show me around the winery, and along the way explained why it has taken so very long to release any wines.

"I did not at the beginning fully envision that we'd be where we are today," Corliss

admits. “It evolved along the way, which is a lot of the reason we’ve been pretty quiet – taking the journey. When you’re on a journey,” he continued, “you take a lot of notes and write it up when you finish. After eight years we know very clearly where we’re going. We have five great vintages that have been done here at the winery; we’ve purchased two estate vineyards, and we will acquire another in the next couple of years. We’ve got a cohesive team of people that have been working together for five years; and Kendall has been here for four of them.”

Corliss is a fourth-generation Seattle native whose primary business is as a developer. He was introduced to great wines while still in his early twenties, as part of a group that purchased old wine cellars. He is certainly the only person I’ve ever known who owned and drank wines that once belonged to Alfred Hitchcock. Those classic, well-cellarred wines shaped his palate, and when he embarked upon his own wine project, it was with the goal of making wines that would age gracefully.

“When you buy and typically drink much older wines, which is what I do, your interest is in how the wine will taste in five, 10 and 20 years,” says Corliss. “It is more challenging to set out to build a wine that can last that long.”

Corliss and Darneille have the financial resources to manage every aspect of the process. They purchased the former Sandhill vineyard (planted in 1989) and tasting room on Red Mountain; it will do its first crush this fall, re-named RMV Cellars. Their Blue Mountain vineyard (planted in 2001) has previously provided grapes for Nicholas Cole. A second vineyard on Red Mountain went into the ground this spring, on property purchased from Michael Moore (Blackwood Canyon). It’s 55 acres planted to all five Bordeaux varietals, plus four Rhône’s – grenache, syrah, mourvèdre and cinsault.

“We did extensive soil mapping and matched soil types to varieties,” Kendall Mix explained as we tasted through his ‘04s a week ago. “We’ve got at least two clones of everything planted, three of cab and merlot. We offset the rows 20 degrees to the southwest.” A fourth vineyard, named the Blackrock vineyard (59 acres, near Lonesome Spring) has also been purchased and is being renovated. “It’s got some established merlot, cab and cab franc that are 7 – 8 years old,” says Mix. “It’s kind of a diamond in the rough; rocky, shallow soils, quite a bit of heat, almost as warm as Red Mountain, and we think the potential is there to grow some fantastic fruit.”

The Corliss Estates winery, in a beautifully refurbished brick building just off the freeway in downtown Walla Walla, is designed to make wines with minimal intervention. Blending trials begin at the end of the first year and continue until bottling two years later. The winery makes a Red Blend, a Cabernet Sauvignon and a Syrah each vintage, and sells primarily to mailing list customers and a few select wine shops. It is not open to the public, but mailing list members may visit by appointment.

Paul Gregutt's reviews of Corliss Wines published in:



2004 Corliss Estates Cabernet Sauvignon

Rating: 94

Cost: \$75

Mostly old vine fruit creates the exceptional Cabernet, which also includes small amounts of the other four Bordeaux grapes in the blend. The lovely bouquet is now starting to develop some secondary aromatics, expressive and complex. Delicious raspberry and cherry fruit flavors, crisply defined by firm acids, are nudged into hedonism with a wash of pretty chocolate and buttery nuts. P.G. (12/1/2009)

2005 Corliss Estates Cabernet Sauvignon

Rating: 93

Cost: \$75

More than the tight and tannic 2005 Corliss Red, this Cabernet Sauvignon is immediately fragrant and open, with a mix of sweet fruit and sweet oak. Black cherry, cassis, subtle notes of lavender, and a foundation of wet stone are all nicely balanced and surprisingly elegant, given the relatively high (15.1%) alcohol. This wine seems now to be entering its prime time—it benefits from decanting, and will cellar well, but should probably be consumed within the next 2–8 years. P.G. (12/1/2010)

2005 Corliss Estates Red Wine

Rating: 92

Cost: \$65

Though it is five years old and just being released, this thick, tannic and rich Bordeaux blend still requires decanting, cellaring, and/or extensive breathing time. A full day after first being tasted, it came together for me; the initial, aggressively herbal character is equally matched to ripe black cherry fruit and massive tannins. The nose suggests sweet cherry, but the palate leans more to the herbal side, with flavors of earth, stem and leaf, and there is a green tea residual flavor that infuses the finish. A wine to cellar and to savor with a fine steak. P.G. (12/1/2010)

2004 Corliss Estates Syrah

Rating: 92

Cost: \$55

Blackberry, blueberry pie and plum fruit flavors are nicely welded to smooth barrel flavors that bring in coffee, licorice, toasted walnuts and mocha. This is definitely a fruit and barrel wine, thoroughly delicious but without the funk or minerality of Walla Walla Syrahs. P.G. (12/1/2009)