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THE EASTSIDE'S MAGAZINE

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\$5.95

FEBRUARY 2019



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For the Love of Wine

The romance of chasing a dream

While drinking wine sets many a heart on fire, making wine can be the polar opposite. Farming the dirt, cleaning tanks, all-nighters during harvest, and possibly the headaches that come with owning a small business can make for frustrations galore. But these three Walla Walla-based couples are making their dreams come true one vintage at a time despite the challenges.



Amy Alvarez-Wampfler and Daniel Wampfler,

WINEMAKERS AT ABEJA

The first thing you notice about this couple is that they clearly love being together. Razor-sharp wit is Dan's native language, and while Amy cracks up at his humor now, it took her a while to warm up. They met at Columbia Crest in 2005, when Dan was making wine and Amy came onboard as an intern.

"We worked together for two years before we started dating. I thought he was full of himself. I didn't get his sense of humor,"

Amy said. "But now I think he's hilarious."

Amy — "Daniel is funny and likes to be the center of attention. I'm more reserved."

Daniel — "She is the center of my attention."

The turning point for Amy occurred when she caught Daniel (only she calls him Daniel) busting out some surprisingly adept dance moves to a Justin Timberlake song behind a tank. In 2008, the couple moved to Walla Walla, where he made wine at Dunham and she commuted daily to the Tri-Cities — a miserable year and a half for Amy. In 2010, she transitioned to

“We worked together for two years before we started dating. I thought he was full of himself. I didn’t get his sense of humor. But now I think he’s hilarious.” – Amy Alvarez-Wampfler

Sinclair Winery in Walla Walla, where she learned the ins and outs of small business management, making wine, managing the tasting room, marketing — all the hats. “It was very eye-opening.”

They always dreamed of working together, so when Abeja owner Ken Harrison, called offering the couple head and assistant winemaker positions, the Wampflers jumped at the chance. “We never thought it would be possible to make wine together,” said Dan.

They’ve seen enough to know they don’t want to own their own label. They’re just thrilled they get to do the thing they fell in love doing — making wine. “The best part is knowing someone has your back in all circumstances,” said Dan. Amy agrees, “We make a great team. Our skills complement one another in the cellar. Together we make better wine.”

Understandably, the hardest part is leaving work at work, and not continuing the work conversations at home. But the tradeoff is the privilege of being together. “Why wouldn’t you want to work with the person you say you love more than anyone else in the world?” Dan said. Indeed. *abeja.net*

Mike and Melissa Berghan,

GIFFORD HIRLINGER

Ask anyone in the Walla Walla wine community. The Berghans are the fun couple — maybe the “funnest,” judging by the width of smiles on faces when their name is mentioned. It’s hard to tell who is the “funner” of the two.

A Kentucky firecracker, Melissa joined the Navy after high school and was stationed in San Diego, where she met friends originally from Spokane. In 1998, she visited said friends, swinging on down to Walla Walla for the Hot Air Balloon Stampede, and never left. She befriended (and often bowled with) many burgeoning winemakers at the time. But her role within the wine industry was mainly as a wine con-

sumer. Even now, she laughs saying, “Mike makes the wine. I drink it.”

Mike rolled onto the Walla Walla wine scene in 2000 after several years of vineyard labor work in Napa. He grew up in Sand Point, Idaho, where his grandfather and great uncle worked in the lumber industry and eventually founded Schweitzer ski resort. During college, Mike studied abroad in Florence, Italy, through Gonzaga University. The school was located on the second floor of the Renaissance home of the Antinori family, just upstairs from the Antinori wine bar. “I met Piero Antinori when I was an idiot knucklehead beer-drinking kid,” said Mike. The experience piqued his interest in wine, and upon graduation, he worked the vineyards of Caymus in Napa, where owner/founder Chuck Wagner offered him grapes from his special selection block when Mike expressed an interest in trying his hand at winemaking.

Ultimately, Mike knew Napa was too expensive to start his own winery, so he toured Washington with his dad. Within an hour of setting foot in Walla Wal-

la, he knew he wanted to stay, and purchased the property that now houses his family, vineyards, winery, and tasting room.

Melissa was actually engaged to someone else when she met Mike. “I was more fun than the other guy,” jokes Mike. Some things are meant to be. Two kids later, they are “living the dream” managing every aspect of their wine production, from farming the vineyards they planted, to making the wine (if Melissa says it tastes great, Mike immediately changes everything about how he’s making it), to running the tasting room (Melissa’s forte). Melissa’s background in the military and corporate world have honed her ability to work efficiently — something “Melissa’s husband” (as Mike is often referred to around town) readily admits he lacks, along with a propensity toward distraction.

“We are invested in what we do,” said Melissa. “We are doers. At the end of the day, we just get stuff done. I like to give Mike credit — he had such a plan, and he stuck with it. And, apparently, I’m bossy enough to make it happen.”

“It’s a lot of hard work, but look where we get to live. We live right above the winery. When I take a step back and look at it, it’s kind of what 90 percent of

