

SPOKESMAN REVIEW

Buty's in the eye of the glass holder

GRAPEVINE

There is always a buzz of excitement when new wineries debut. Even among the most dedicated winery watchers, names such as àMaurice Cellars, Adamant Cellars, Bradenvue Cellars, Ensemble Cellars, Foundry Vineyards, Gifford Hirlinger, Sapphire Mountain Cellars, Skylite Cellars and Trio Vintners – all new Walla Walla wineries releasing wines next month – may be head-scratchers.

But it is time that takes the true measure of any young winery. After the initial excitement of that first “date,” what I look for is consistent, steady improvement and an emerging sense of a polished style. I have found it in the wines of Buty.”

This small Walla Walla winery (it's pronounced “beauty”) is right on the cutting edge of quality and innovation. Caleb Foster and Nina Buty Foster founded their family business in 2000, but Caleb's winemaking experience goes back eight years earlier, working with Rick Small at Woodward Canyon, consulting for Mount Baker winery and Glen Fiona, and working several crushes in New Zealand and South Africa.

Foster is one of the most enthusiastic winemakers I have ever known, eager to discuss the fine points of barrel fermentation, the advantages of native yeasts (slower, cooler ferments leading to lower alcohol levels and more complexity) and always willing to share a few trade secrets with an interested visitor.

The Fosters have built their business the hard way. They made their wines at five different locations in their first six years, using borrowed equipment and trading their labor and expertise in return.

“We rented everything,” says Caleb. “If we didn't put it in the bottle, put a capsule on it and sell it, I didn't want to own it.” Their limited resources were carefully allocated to purchasing the best possible grapes, and hiring the best consultant they could find – Zelma Long. Long, who also has been working with J. Bookwalter winery, was hired to help Buty build a better chardonnay.

The program has worked and at this point, Buty has a track record for excellence that should be the envy of almost any young winery in the state. From its first vintage, it was clear that Buty was starting out at a very competent level, and the Fosters have consistently ramped it up from there. They haven't yet made a wine that wasn't stylish and well-crafted. Each year the wines gain a bit extra in terms of detail and precision. Buty wines, both white and red, consistently show the sort of nuance and depth that mark the world's best.

The Fosters are committed to keeping alcohol levels in check while striving for balance, elegance and extract. Their wines blend subtle mineral, herbal and spice components, in a style that is clean, a bit lean, polished and complex.

Last spring, I tasted through four vintages of Buty's Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc; and earlier this month I tasted the just-released 2005 and the

still-fermenting components for the 2006. This classic combination of grapes, some barrel-fermented and some done in stainless steel, emulates a top-tier Bordeaux blanc. At six years of age, the 2000 vintage has evolved a honeyed nuttiness, while still retaining its youthful crispness. Rich, round, secondary fruit flavors buttressed with hints of clove and pepper provide additional highlights. Washington whites do not generally age this well; this is a mark of real excellence.

The current vintage, Buty's 2005 Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc (\$21), is quite consistent with past bottlings, which is to say very smooth, round, rich and toasty. Still young, it is showing a lot of pretty new oak flavors, and somewhat waxy peach and fig fruit. Clearly it has the potential to improve for several more years.

Also newly-released this fall, are Buty's 2005 Conner Lee Vineyard Chardonnay (\$30) and 2003 Columbia Rediviva Red Blend (\$40). The chardonnay benefits from meticulous fermentation practices and an especially ripe and balanced vintage. It's been barrel fermented in 1- to 4-year-old Burgundy barrels, with no acid or water additions and frequent lees stirring. The fruit flavors of apples and white peaches are shot through with butterscotch and caramel, and the finish, though not exactly sweet, has a pleasing candy quality.

The 2003 Columbia Rediviva is a blend of 57 percent cabernet sauvignon and 43 percent syrah. The grapes come from Champoux (Horse Heaven Hills) and Cailloux vineyards (Walla Walla Valley),

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and the wine is bursting at the seams with bright berry flavors. Still tart and tight, it needs to be aired out to release the compact, powerful fruit and smooth itself out. Despite the edgy acidity it shows a bounty of spice, moist earth and ripe tannins balanced against the sweet/tart blackberry juice.

All Buty wines are made in limited quantities, with total production at about 3,000 cases. For information on where to purchase their wines, I suggest you contact the tasting room at (509) 527-0901 or e-mail them at info@butywinery.com.

The tasting room is at 535 E. Cessna Ave. at the Walla Walla airport, and is open most weekends during crush. During the upcoming Holiday Barrel Tasting, scheduled for the first weekend in December, the winery will be pouring its new releases along with some mystery barrel samples, and all case purchases will be discounted 10 percent.

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