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Wine Adviser

From dreams and passion come these start-up standouts

By **Paul Gregutt**
Special to the Seattle Times



Despite the occasional Grand Entrance by an out-of-state wine celebrity (welcome, Randall Graham), the majority of winery start-ups here in Washington are small, underfunded and virtually invisible.

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This is not bad news for the consumer, for it means that wine touring has become a fascinating voyage of discovery. The visitor to almost any corner of the state is sure to find new wineries, tasting rooms and labels.

Often, production is so small that the wines are only available at the tasting room, through the mailing list and in a handful of shops and restaurants.

A second great pleasure is meeting the people behind these enterprises. They are eager to tell their stories, especially when pouring that first vintage, released after years of dreaming, planning, financial risk-taking and constant problem solving.

In recent weeks I've chatted with a former editor for CNN, a geologist doing digital cartography, a one-time L.A. police officer and an astronomy buff, among many others, all embarked on winemaking careers.

What unites these individuals is their unflappable passion for making wine.

They may not have a clue as to how they will do it when the dream first grips them. But they cannot resist it. They do not want to resist it. They leave secure jobs, reassure worried spouses, move to unfamiliar towns and work for free doing the most boring and menial tasks, all to prepare for making a few barrels of wine in some rented corner.

The joy that this brings is difficult to understand, but wonderful to behold. These microtiques, as I have named them, exist where the borders of art,

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Pick of the week

Henri Bourgeois "Petit Bourgeois" 2006 Rosé de Pinot Noir; \$10. A pale copper/rose color, this bone-dry, low-alcohol rosé is perfect for chilling and sipping. It is just the sort of wine you might drink in some charming little café in an obscure French village, wishing all the while that you could find a bottle when you returned home. Well, now you can. (Grape Expectations).

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science and fantasy meet. They strive for years to produce a product that all too often will be overlooked by the critics, disdained by the trade and ignored by the public. It's a tough business.



Before any of these glittery new carriages turn back into pumpkins, I want to point you to some discoveries made during the past few weeks. Each comes with a dream and a story, from a stubbornly dedicated winemaker committed to making that dream real.

Animale 2005 Syrah; \$26

Phone: 206-782-8047

E-mail: animale@animalewine.com

Matt Gubitosa, a geologist by trade, has hit a milestone after five full years making wine in his Ballard basement winery. In 2005, he proudly reports, he produced his biggest vintage yet — 210 cases. "I nudged it up a bit," he says, "but I'm always trying to balance having a life too."

Animale first caught my attention with a rather bold and muscular syrah, but in general the style of these wines is restrained, and Gubitosa favors cool-climate fruit. His wines generally see little or no new oak, and though carefully crafted, do not shy away from herbal scents and flavors.

In 2005, he explains, "I've used only cool-climate fruit, and it's a cooler vintage, so there's a theme of longer hang time, firmer acid, nice herbs and definitely some tannins in the wines." This syrah is packed with flavor — black pepper, smoked ham, mushroom and fennel wrapped into the firm black fruits. It's a wine that keeps reaching out to you if you pay attention, and certainly should evolve nicely over the next six to eight years.

Also new from Animale: a Yakima Valley Red blend, a Maria Carmela Red, a merlot and a cabernet, all priced in the mid to low \$20s.

Trust Cellars 2006 Cabernet Franc Rosé; \$16.

Phone: 509-529-4511

E-mail: steve@trustcellars.com

Trust Cellars owner/winemaker Steve Brooks left Atlanta after two decades at CNN, bound and determined to become a winemaker. He had never before made wine or studied winemaking when an article in The New York Times got him interested in Eastern Washington. Until he read it, Brooks admits, he had no idea that grapes were even grown there.

Inspired, he told everyone he knew that he was going to start his own winery. "That's so I couldn't back out," he explains. "We opened the map and looked and saw that Walla Walla was in the middle of nowhere." Nonetheless, he journeyed west, convinced his wife (a freelance sports director) that Walla Walla was in fact the right place to make wine, sold their Atlanta house and began helping out at local wineries.

You don't generally start at the top when you are apprenticing yourself to someone in the wine business. "All you do rack [empty, clean and refill barrels]," says Brooks, "and when you get done, you start over. But what was I going to do? I wasn't going to go to Tri-Cities and get a TV job."

Five years later, Brooks has his reward. Three new wines from Trust Cellars were released last month, roughly 450 cases of a riesling, a syrah and this excellent rosé. Round, ripe and showing mixed cherry and apple fruit flavors, it's soft and accessible, with beautiful fruit and some delicate

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spice notes of cinnamon and sandalwood.

Ash Hollow 2006 Gewurztraminer; \$19.

Phone: 509-529-7565

E-mail: john@AshHollow.com

Co-incidentally, Ash Hollow also has released a 2006 Rosé of Cabernet Franc; this one styled more in the crisp, herbal mode of Chinook's popular bottling. But its bone-dry 'traminer is better still, and not to be missed. Winemaker Steve Clifton (who is also partner/winemaker at California's Brewer-Clifton) spent some time in Friuli, and thereby became quite fond of high-acid, stainless-steel fermented white wines.

"It starts with bringing wine into the context of food," says Clifton, "as an extension of the plate. Do as little as you possibly can in the cellar." If ever a wine were meant to marry with Wild Ginger-style cuisine, it is this gorgeously aromatic 'traminer. Citrus, grapefruit, light floral scents and plenty of acid fill the mouth, lingering into a textural, refreshing finish.

Ash Hollow made its first wines in 2002. There are several partners, including John Turner, a Walla Walla native who worked for some time as a Los Angeles police officer. Turner and Clifton were high school and college friends, and Turner's visits to Clifton's Southern California project ultimately led him back home to start a vineyard and a winery.

The new releases cover the bases, from plate-extenders such as 100-percent varietal sauvignon blanc and pinot gris to the iconic Somanna (a blend of both), a pizza-friendly Nine Mile Red and well-made cabernet and syrah. Clearly, the best yet from this up-and-coming young producer.

Sleight of Hand "The Spellbinder"; \$18.

Phone: 509/386-6566

E-mail: Trey@SofHcellars.com

Winemaker Trey Busch, whose years as winemaker at Basel Cellars lifted that winery to prominence in the highly competitive Walla Walla winemaking community, has left (he still consults) to create Sleight of Hand, his own project. Sleight of Hand cleverly uses graphics and names culled from the world of magic a century ago. The tidy tasting room, right next to Ash Hollow's in downtown Walla Walla, is decorated with reproductions of magic posters from the era, and the wines bear names such as The Spellbinder and The Magician.

The winery name was inspired by a Pearl Jam song (such wines are becoming an entire subset of the Washington wine industry), and the expressive imagery it conjures seems sure to catch consumers' attention. But it is really the stylish, clever and very approachable winemaking that sets this boutique apart from its competitors.

The Spellbinder, a nonvintage blend of cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon and sangiovese, skillfully marries the strong, herbal tannin of the cabs to fat, buttery, oak-driven flavors softened with some light sangiovese. There is also a round, fruity gewürztraminer (The Magician) and a super-premium Bordeaux blend (The Archimage) made with old vine fruit from Champoux, Klipsun and Bacchus.

SYZGY 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon; \$32.

Phone: 509-522-0484

E-Mail: info@syzygywines.com

SYZYGY (all caps, please, say the owners) is the patriarch of this group of newcomers, having premiered with the 2002 vintage. Production has climbed from a few hundred to almost 2000 cases, where Zach Brettler says he'll keep it, at least for awhile.

He's an astronomy buff (the unusual name is a term describing a moment of perfect alignment among three celestial bodies, such as during a total eclipse). The newly-released cabernet, perhaps the best wine they've yet produced, was picked on the day that a partial eclipse swept over Alaska, Hawaii and Northeast Asia.

It's 100-percent varietal, from 35-year-old Sagemoor and 18-year-old Conner Lee vines, and it has a meaty, herbal power to it. Streaks of tar and some lively cinnamon spice add life to the fruit, which is solid and earthy. Flavors keep appearing as it airs — black licorice, vanilla cream — interesting footnotes to the tannins, which are dusty and smoky and a bit grainy. I found that the layered, dense, herbal qualities reminded me of the better Margaret River (Australian) cabs. Drunk with dinner, five hours after it was first tasted, the wine was exceptional, fully fleshed out and richly layered.

It's always interesting to ask a winemaker how he or she got into the business, and why. Brettler's answer may not be the whole story, but there are many stories tucked into it. "My original intention," he says, "was to drink more wine for less money. But it's proved to be the exact opposite."

How to find recommended wines: Unless noted, all Wine Adviser recommendations are currently available, though vintages may sometimes differ. All wine shops and most groceries have a wine specialist on staff. Show them this column, and if they do not have the wine in stock, they can order it for you from the local distributor (noted in parentheses).

Paul Gregutt writes the Wednesday wine column for The Seattle Times.

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