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A couple's adventure with Melon

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ASIA January 11, 2008

MEETING THE WINEMAKERS

Two weeks ago, we wrote about an obscure American wine called Melon, which is the grape used to make Muscadet in France's Loire Valley. In the process, we happened across a small winery in Washington state, Perennial Vintners. We dropped the owners, Mike Lempriere and Beth Schoenberg, a note to ask about their Melon. Mr. Lempriere's return note communicates well why you should look for unusual wines from small, passionate producers.

"We got our start with Melon serendipitously," Mr. Lempriere wrote. "When we decided we wanted to make wine, I contacted an acquaintance, Stan Clarke. At the time, he was the viticulturist for Newhouse Vineyards in Sunnyside, Washington; until recently he was on the faculty for the wine program in (the town of) Walla Walla. Stan took us out to the vineyard and walked around with us, teaching us on the spot. (He died suddenly just a few weeks ago, a notable blow to the Washington industry.) The vineyard has a small block of plants used as a nursery to supply cuttings for new plants. The vineyard had one row of Melon (80 plants).

"As amateurs, we harvested that row from 1998 to 2002. Each year we were mildly disappointed with the condition of the grapes -- they were growing the plants for wood, not for grapes, so they were nonideal for wine. (When growing for grapes, you'll be spraying sulfur and/or other mildewcides on a regular schedule. When growing for wood, cuttings for new plants, you don't care so much if the grapes get rot or mildew, so you may not spray as often as

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you should.) This helped us realize how important it is to grow the grapes yourself. The wine was also somewhat bland, as eastern Washington is just too warm a climate for Melon. Regardless, we still loved the wine it made.

"When we decided we wanted to have our own vineyard, we knew we had to live on it. We considered a spot near Walla Walla, but we'd have to keep our day gigs in Seattle to pay for the vineyard, so the 4 1/2-hour drive killed that idea. This limited us to the Puget Sound area, a notably cool climate. Our vineyard is the closest one to downtown Seattle.

"We planted our first 100 plants in 2004. We have filled in the rest of the vineyard space since then and are now up to 350 plants. In 2007, we got our first significant harvest from the initial 100 plants. Unfortunately, this was the worst Puget Sound ripening year since the early 1970s. The Melon did not ripen sufficiently to make a decent wine. We have not thrown in the towel at this point, so we'll be giving it another year before deciding if this is not a good climate for Melon. We are planning to make a sparkling wine from this year's harvest, but that may not be available before the 2008 still wine is ready. So, in summary, we have no Melon in a bottle yet, and probably won't until mid-2009. Even then, the amount will be tiny, perhaps 75 cases. We should have 100 cases from 2010 onwards. If we get additional neighboring acreage, it's possible we'll achieve several hundred cases as of 2012."

Next time you see an unusual wine on shelves that you've never seen before, think of Mr. Lempriere and Ms. Schoenberg and their 100 plants of Melon -- and try it.

--Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.

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