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Breezes bring best vines possible



Canyon Wind Cellars owners Jennifer and Jay Christianson inspect the vines.

By Dave Buchanan
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You look once and look again, and suddenly you want to stop, to get out of the car and touch the vines, just to make sure they are real.

The green fuses are immaculate, each one absolutely in place, with tight-bunched clusters of green berries bursting from the verdant foliage.

And that's when Finley, the Labrador retriever and resident greeter, runs up, reminding you that Canyon Wind Cellars is as much about enjoying life as it is about making the best wine possible.

The winery, tucked under the protective brow of Mount Garfield, and a long three-iron from the Colorado River, is one of the state's older wineries, its first vines planted in 1991 when Norm Christianson, a geologist by training and wine lover by disposition, discovered a unique spot east of Palisade.

Christianson's eye for nature's forms also trained him to know a good site for winemaking, and on a breezy, sun-drenched cobblestone bench above the Colorado River he planted a row of cabernet sauvignon, the first of what now is 35 acres of various grape vines.

He adopted the name Canyon Wind Cellars in honor of what he calls "the million dollar breeze," that crop-saving draft blowing year-round out of De Beque Canyon, moderating the summer heat and protecting the delicate vines from winter's deepest frost.

Canyon Wind Cellars, with the guidance of renowned winemaking consultant Robert Pepi, produced its first vintage in 1996, and among the help that first year was a young Jay Christianson, who at 9 had already spent several years roaming the vineyards.

"Oh, yes, I remember that vintage," said Jay, his laugh rebounding around the winery's underground cellar, the only one of its kind in the state. "My first real harvest was the 1996 chardonnay and merlot."

Fast forward to 2012. Norm is two years retired, leaving the winery under the direction of Jay, who turns 30 in early August, and his wife, Jennifer, 36.

The two second-generation Colorado winemakers (Jay's heritage by birth, Jennifer's by marriage) have plunged heart and soul into the winery, respecting the legacy of Norm Christianson while tackling the changes they see will take

Canyon Wind Cellars into the future of Colorado wine.

Among the more notable revisions is a focus on making blended reds as an addition to the single-varietal wines that garnered Canyon Wind its early success.

“Norm looked at the lands in a varietal context,” explained Jay during a recent conversation. “This single-varietal focus was the box he was in and one of the things we want to do is go outside that box.”

He isn't disparaging his father's winemaking. If anything, Jay realizes that Norm walked a path familiar to him and his customers.

But Jay and Jennifer, as if heeding the wisdom of the fifth century Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who said, “If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading,” saw the winery's 35 acres of grape vines could produce remarkable blends.

Standing deep underground in the thick-walled barrel cellar where oak-casked wines rest until their release, Jay said, “Our goal is to make the best wine for the property.”

Which means “we grow everything,” Jay said, noting it is a point of pride to deliver a true low-intervention “vin de terroir” such as the Boreas, the top of their Anemoi line of wines.

“We're also taking a more thoughtful approach to making wine from the vineyard,” he said.

It is a goal adapted from legendary winemaker Robert Sinskey, one of the remarkable personages the Christiansons met during one of their California wine trips.

Sinskey espouses his 10 points of winemaking, among which are “Fine wines have a sense of place” and “Know your vineyards.”

Inspiration Moment No. 1: It was Jennifer, a Chicago girl who went to school at the University of Colorado and met Jay when the two were working in Vail, who came up with the vision for the Anemoi line.

“It was one of her lightning-bolt moments,” said Jay. “She doesn't hedge on some things, and it was, ‘What do you say about a new brand?’ “

Jay was “speechless,” he said, perhaps a rare moment for the voluble winemaker.

“But one of our goals was to have the ability to try new products, and even if it weren't successful I figured it wouldn't be the end of the world,” he said.

That led to Anemoi, a name Jennifer found while thumbing through books during one of the couple's wine-marketing trips to Denver and back.

Anemoi refers to the Greek wind gods as well as the canyon breeze that protects the vineyard in summer and winter.

Today, Canyon Wind Cellars, still under Pepi's seasonal guidance, produces 14 wines under three labels: the affordable 4710 brand (named for the vineyard's elevation); eight varietals under the familiar Canyon Wind label; and the new Anemoi line, which offers two hearty red-blends named Boreas (north wind) and Zephyrus (east wind) and lapyx (the north-west wind), a late-harvest pinot grigio.

Other changes initiated by Jay and Jennifer are subtle reflections of lessons well-learned during wine-tasting trips to California and other wine regions.

Not only do the two watch carefully and ask the right question to winemakers of all sorts, they also take a keen interest in customer relations.

Perhaps that is an offshoot of their pre-winemaking days in Vail when Jay was a youth ski coach and the Front Range marketer for Canyon Wind and Jennifer the fundraiser and development director for local and U.S. team skiers.

The tasting room at Canyon Wind today enlivens the best of what the Christiansons saw during their travels.

“We saw some terrible tasting rooms and some great ones,” said Jay, “and we saw what we could do better.”

Inspiration Moment No. 2: Jay and Jennifer noticed on their trips that wine clubs, in which wineries regularly offer members special offers and events, had great potential but were often overlooked.

“We found out that many customers want to feel like they’re part of the family, that they have a special place at the winery,” said Jennifer. “It’s really not that expensive but it’s a way to reach out, to really get close to our customers and build a relationship with them.”

Of course, the idea is to sell wines not usually available in the tasting room, and the Christiansons often make special-issue wines available to Canyon Wind wine club members.

Recently, members received a rare vertical of the 2006, 2007 and 2008 cabernet sauvignon, and the most-recent Canyon Wind Cellars Wine Club newsletter announced club members have access to the extensive Canyon Wind library, including the stellar 1997 cabernet sauvignon.

“That’s one of the greatest wines we’ve ever made,” said Jay, who admits the 1996 might have been better “but we drank it all at our wedding.”

Inspiration No. 3: Follow your palate.

“Both Jay and I love red blends, and this vineyard offers the potential for great red blends,” said Jennifer.

The Anemoi line reflects that love of blending grape varietals. The 2009 Boreas (\$35) is a blend of cabernet sauvignon (43 percent), merlot (21 percent), cabernet franc (21) and petite verdot (15).

The 2010 Zephyrus (\$35) is 50/50 cabernet franc/petite verdot.

“We initially made these to see what the vineyard could do and we’ve been very pleasantly surprised at their reception,” Jay said. “We’ve just about sold out of both, and that’s at full retail.”

Developing Anemoi, Jennifer said, “was the perfect opportunity for me to dive into creating a style of wines that I love.”

Inspiration Moment No. 4: Hand number each bottle of Boreas, the flagship of the Anemoi line.

This is a time-consuming act thoughtfully done, giving Jay and Jennifer one more connection with an unseen consumer in whose opinion lies the future of their efforts.

Finally, Inspiration Moment No. 5: Introduce the 2-year-old Finley as the winery’s Chief Canine Officer.

His enthusiastic presence, both on the website (<http://www.canyonwindcellars.com>) and at the winery, has countless visitors blowing up the winery's inbox.

"He actually gets more letters on our site than we do," said Jennifer with a laugh. "Can you believe it? It's amazing, people call us and ask, 'How's Finley doing?'" "

Well, in case you wonder, Finley is doing just fine, thank you, and so are the Christiansons and Canyon Wind Cellars.

It's all real, and headed in the right direction.