

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND REVIEW

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Cheers! New wineries to open

By TRISTAN BAURICK Staff Writer

Three new island outfits bring total to five.

The island is about to get hit with a flood. Flowing in red and in white, this torrent will draw more cork-sniffing, glass swirling oenophiles than FEMA sandbaggers..

The number of wineries on Bainbridge is set to more than double, with three new purveyors of pinots and other vinos joining the island's two tried-and-true.

"People who live here are wine drinkers," said Charlie Merrill, who is set to transform what has long been a passion into a new vocation. "There's plenty of room for these new, smaller wineries and I think that we'll end up supporting each other."

Merrill's Island Center-based Victor Alexander Winery will join Perennial **Vintners** of Lovgreen Road and Eagle Harbor Wine Company of Day Road as grapes are crushed, juice aged and bottles corked in the coming months.

"These wineries are coming up like mushrooms all over the place," said Jo Ann Bentryn, who has produced wine with her husband Gerard at Bainbridge Island Vineyards for over 25 years. "It may bring a little recognition to Bainbridge. Instead of going to Woodinville, with their 20 or so wineries, maybe people will come here and stay longer."

Rather than compete, the new wineries will likely cooperate and compliment the each other, said Matt Albee of Eleven Winery, which has operated on Roe Road since 2003.

"I think it's great," Albee said. "I've been hoping since I started here that there'd be four or five (wineries) on the island. People can now come to Bainbridge and have a full day of wine tasting."

Perennial **Vintners** is first on the menu. Winemaker Mike Lempriere plans to bottle 80 cases, or approximately 190 gallons in 950 bottles, of his Müller Thurgau in mid-March. Made with island-grown grapes, Lempriere describes his first commercial batch as a two-year-old "bone dry" white.

"We're going with strictly local grapes," he said during a tour of his half-acre vineyard overlooking the Olympic Mountains. "We hope to have people out here because it's important to get to know and feel the land where the wine comes from."

In addition to his own vineyard, Lempriere is growing Perennial's grapes on lands owned by his neighbors the Bentryns, and he plans to expand into nearby city-owned



Brad Camp/Staff Photo

Charlie Merrill's Victor Alexander winery is set to bottle next year.

agricultural lands.

Lempriere will offer a sneak preview of his wine at the Northwest Boutique Winery Showcase in Seattle on Wednesday.

Merrill plans to unveil Victor Alexander's first white wine in June 2008 using Eastern Washington grapes culled from this fall's harvest. The winery will eventually produce 800 to 1,000 cases of white and red wine per year, Merrill said.

Eagle Harbor Wine owner Hugh Remash is also aiming for a 2008 premier of his Columbia River valley syrah and cabernet.

Remash, who has worked in the wine industry for over 10 years and founded the now-closed Winslow Wine Shop in the late 1990s, opted to import from Eastern Washington because the grapes for popular red wines are difficult to grow in the Puget Sound region.

"I don't know if it's the weather or what, but Northwesterners prefer reds by leaps and bounds," he said. "But here, you can't plant a merlot. It just doesn't grow. If I want to be viable, I have to essentially bring in grapes."

Light-colored wines represent about 58 percent of the U.S. market, according to a December 2006 wine industry commissioned by VINEXPO.

"But here, it's the other way around, with about 70 percent liking red to 30 percent for white" Remash said. "Even getting people here to taste whites is an ordeal. I say 'Just taste it! You can spit it out if you want to,' and they say 'oh, I'd rather not. I like red wines.' It's amazing!"

Lempriere is on a mission to change Northwest wine prejudices, one glass at a time. He planted over 200 vines of Melon de Bourgogne grapes, a variety common in the wet, maritime regions of France, but largely unknown in the U.S. The white wine these grapes produce is a tasty fit with Northwest seafoods, Lempriere said.

"No one else in Washington is making it, even though it's totally natural for this area," he said. "But I'm really championing it. I'm going to make people realize how wonderful it is."

Lempriere plans to schlep cases of his Melon de Bourgogne to Seattle restaurants specializing in seafood.

"I'm going to hit those restaurants hard," he said.

Like the other new island wineries, Lempriere also plans to sell in island shops, grocery stores and high-end eateries.

As the number of wine makers grow, so too has the number of downtown retailers.

Harbor Square Wine Shop & Tasting Room opened almost a month ago on Winslow Way. The shop's owner, Ronald Tweiten, is already in talks to sell some of Merrill's first batch. The Living Room wine bar is set to open in the coming weeks at the Seabreeze on Bjune Drive.

Eleven Winery and Eagle Harbor Wine are joining forces to open a tasting room in the Winslow Mall sometime in April. The shop will be a rebirth, of sorts, for Remash's earlier wine enterprise at the same location.

"We'll work together," said Eleven's Albee, who produces 800 cases annually in a converted garage in Manzanita. "The wine tasting room gives us a public face. That'll be really good because a lot of people on the island doesn't even know we exist."

Unlike Bainbridge Island Vineyards, which boasts tours of rolling vine-covered hills, most of the island's new wineries are garage or basement-based, with grapes imported from the east.

Still, the growing aroma may attract more wine lovers from the Seattle area and beyond.

"The wineries are a reflection of the taste and demographics of the island," said Bainbridge Island Chamber of Commerce director Kevin Dwyer. "It may also be a nice addition to our tourism economy. What attracts people is not just one brand, it's people saying, 'Geez, there's four or five wineries over there on Bainbridge. We should go visit there.' I think they could be very successful as we reach a critical mass of wineries."

The sudden growth of wineries on Bainbridge follows an explosive state-wide trend. In 1981, Washington produced 2 million gallons of wine. By 2005, that number had

topped 18 million. Over 30,000 acres are under wine grape cultivation, with leading varieties, such as merlot and chardonnay, pulling in over \$600 million annually, according to the Washington Wine Commission.

"It's booming," said commission spokeswoman Gaby Matthews. "The future of Washington wine is limitless."

For Merrill, who works as a medical technician, wine's 'limitless future' could turn a long-held love into a lucrative new career.

"I apprenticed myself for years to winemakers," he said, noting stints at Sequim and Lopez Island wineries. "I worked for free, but the value of it was worth every minute I spent. Now my goal is to make a wine that sells and has my own artistic flavor. I've tasted the other island wines. All the wines are good.

Hopefully, these wineries will become a Bainbridge institution as time goes by."

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