

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND REVIEW

Apr 04 2007

Island wine hits the big time

By TRISTAN BAURICK Staff Writer

The boutique label 'Perennial Vintners' makes its debut at SAM.

SEATTLE - Mike Lempriere is trying to rein in his excitement.

It's not working.

His mind abuzz, Lempriere takes a wrong turn shortly after rolling off the ferry. He winds through numerous busy streets – nearly T-boning a cab on Yesler – before looping around to his destination on First Avenue. If he's feeling a little distracted, he has good reason. Ten years worth of hard work, financial risk and creative passion have taken him to this moment in the gleaming white lobby of the Seattle Art Museum.

"I'm psyched, I'm psyched," he says, glancing at an upside-down car suspended from the ceiling. "I'm here, and it's really hitting home." He bundles his hands tightly behind his back, but nervous energy shoots down his legs and fires him up on his tiptoes at random intervals. The wide grin stretched across his face hasn't budged since he walked in. Lempriere's come to realize he's making his debut among Rodins, Rubens and Renoirs.

But Lempriere isn't an artist – in the strict sense. He's not particularly talented with watercolors, oils, pastels or even Crayolas. But Amy Kinsella, the assistant manager of SAM's new restaurant 'Taste,' says Lempriere is a high caliber creator.

"It's complex, unique," she says after splitting open a cardboard box full of Lemprier's little bottled masterpieces. "His wine really impressed me."

Lempriere – Bainbridge resident and former computer programmer – is now a bona fide winemaker. The first batch bearing his 'Perennial Vintners' label found a windfall buyer in the museum's restaurant, which is set to open May 5.

"I expected maybe I'd get into some seafood restaurant, maybe a store on the island" Lempriere says. "But this – this is super."

New roots

Lempriere came to Bainbridge Island four years ago with a dream, but little else.



Brad Camp/Staff Photo

Island winemaker Mike Lempriere shows off a bottle of his Perennial Vintner wine while delivering it to his first customer, the Seattle Art Museum's new restaurant 'Taste.' Taste, which specializes in Washington-grown wines, is set to open May 5.

"I just really wanted to live on a vineyard," he said. "I visited a lot of them in Eastern Washington. There was a vineyard over there where I immediately felt peace and calm around me. I decided I had to have one."

With a child in tow, Lempriere and his wife Beth Schoenberg, a sign language interpreter, knew they'd have to scrimp while working day jobs. A stable financial base would allow them to come home in the evening to till soil, clear weeds and cultivate vines.

Growing grapes was new to Lempriere, but he had been making wine in his basement since 1997.

"I started by making 20 gallons," he said. "It was fun – great fun. I entered it in an amateur competition at the Puyallup Fair and won second place in the red wine category. Then I went crazy like a kid in a candy store, getting all kinds of varieties. I made as much as I legally could – 200 gallons."

The next logical step was to make the the grapes as well as the wine.

"We knew that the most essential part of the winemaking dream was to be growing our own grapes, but our family would not be able to afford to quit the day gigs while establishing the winery," he said. "We seriously considered Eastern Washington, but decided not to because the work is over here. We didn't want to commute four hours or live over here and pay someone else to work our land."

Then Lempriere received an email from longtime Bainbridge winemaker Gerard Bentryn. "He told me that the property south of him was on the market," Lempriere said. "We ran out, took a look, my wife fell in love with it, I fell in love with it, we bought it and it's just that simple."

But paying the mortgage while resuscitating what is essentially a dying island trade isn't so simple.

"I figure the more grapes I grow the less in the hock I'll be," he said. "Many wineries go into debt and can't dig out, so we know we'll have to work fulltime to subsidize our 'damn little hobby.' It'll be nice if by the time we retire the winery will pay for itself." Lempriere was recently laid-off from Cisco Systems, where he worked for over seven years. Losing his job has a big financial hit, but it was well-timed.

"They let me go just in time for the harvest," he said. "Talk about a mixed blessing." Lempriere is looking for a new 9 to 5 job on top of the 20 to 30 hours he puts in at the winery.

"What am I doing?" he asked. "I guess it's insanity."

While the financial side of his new business is on unstable ground, Lempriere need only look outside his kitchen window to see how deeply rooted his new vocation is.

"There's grape vines, planted 25 or 30 years ago, that are growing up the trees over in the woods," he said. "I don't know who planted them. I wish I knew their story, but the grapes tell you something about the history of the place.

I think it's worth resurrecting."

Lempriere credits Bentryn, who co-owns Bainbridge Island Vineyards & Winery, for helping to get his wine-making enterprise off the ground.

"Gerard is a gem," he said. "I'm impressed by the way he does things and how he values making grapes on this own land. He was absolutely instrumental in getting us started growing as soon as possible."

Lempriere planted a half-acre of his Lovgreen Road property with Melon de Bourgogne grapes. Favored in the maritime regions of northwest France, the pale grape produces a white wine that is largely unknown in the United States.

For Lempriere, the wine's introduction to the Pacific Northwest was long overdue.

"It grows really well here and is a perfect fit with our seafood," he said.

Lempriere also planted a half acre of Bentryn's land with Muller Thurgau grapes. It is from this crop that **Perennial Vintners** produced its first commercial vintage.

Last month, Lempriere, his wife, the Bentryns and a handful of volunteers put about 190 gallons of the two-year-old Muller Thurgau in 950 bottles.

Lempriere had humble expectations for this first batch. Maybe a few Bainbridge eateries

or wine retailers would pick it up, he says. A lucky break might put his wine on the menu of a Seattle restaurant. But debuting as high-profile as the Seattle Art Museum came as a welcome shock.

"I was pouring my wine at a little winery show in Seattle," Lempriere said. "A lady comes up, tries it and likes it. I thank her. Then she tells me she's with the Seattle Art Museum and wants to buy my wine."

She bought only one case to start, but may order more depending on how diners respond.

"We believe in local food," Kinsella says, watching Lempriere take in the restaurant's sleek surroundings. "And we want to show our support with our wine list. I expect that we'll be ordering more of Mike's wine."

Kinsella makes a show of putting a bottle of **Perennial Vintners** wine in the restaurant's vast display rack.

She does this to humor Lempriere, and it works.

"It's an honor, a real honor," he says.

Uncorked

Call **Perennial Vintners** at 780-2146 or see www.perennialvintners.com. Wine can be purchased at the winery. Call ahead to set up a visit.

© Copyright 2007 Bainbridge Island Review