



Corey Braunel, left, and Chad and Janet Johnson.

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Dusted Valley Vintners

Walla Walla, Wash.

BY ERIC DEGERMAN

To Corey Braunel, Chad Johnson and their 4,000 e-mail fans, the address of Dusted Valley Vintners might as well read, “Walla Walla, Wis.”

The fun-loving brothers-in-law embrace and play off their Wisconsin cheese-head heritage. And while there’s a lot of levity bouncing around their 4,000-case facility, the wines are serious, stunning and consistent.

“Crack the cap” reads the invitation to their screwcap wines. “The first two glasses are for your health. The second two are for ours!”

That’s how Dusted Valley evolved

into our 2010 Washington Winery of the Year. And their empire continues to grow.

“We must be up to about 15 different wines, which is fun and it helps with the A.D.D. because you don’t have to focus on one thing all the time,” Johnson said.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of their efforts is the 2006 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, which features Wisconsin oak.

It finished No. 1 in Wine Press Northwest’s 2009 judging of 134 Northwest-built Cabs, grabbed a gold at the Seattle Wine Awards, then went on to earn a Double Platinum in our year-ending competition of international gold-medal winners.

“There’s a lot of pride in that bottle,” Braunel said. “It was the first time for us farming our own fruit.”

Rather than flirt with disaster, they sealed that wine — and everything else after 2005 — with screwcap. That includes the Dusted Valley 2007 Grenache from the Columbia Valley, which also received a Platinum after winning a double gold at the 2009 San Francisco Chronicle.

“As far as we know, we are the only winery in Washington that does all screwcap, whether it’s on the high-end or value stuff,” Johnson said.

The story of Dusted Valley is far from stale. Johnson and his wife, Janet, were living in Portland and trying to sell the wine-loving Braunel and Janet’s sister, Cindy, on moving to Walla Walla to chase their dream together.

“We were all born and raised in Wisconsin,” Braunel said. “I grew up on a cultivated ginseng farm, and our family had exported crops to Hong Kong for 40 years. By the time I came home from college, the farm pretty much wasn’t around because the market had changed, so I landed

on the corporate ladder in medical supplies and marketing.”

In 2003, they dived in with 13 tons of grapes and never looked back. Johnson took the winemaking lead because of his background in food science. He learned on the fly and under the wing of Whitman Cellars winemaker Steve Lessard. Braunel focuses on business administration, but as co-winemaker he’s with Johnson every step of the way.

“Janet still has the day job, in pharmaceutical sales,” Braunel said. “We joke around here that she supports us all in the family habit.”

The natives of “Sconni” — slang for Wisconsin — produced 700 cases in 2003. They’ve increased production each year by about 1,000 cases, leveling off at 4,000 cases.

That doesn’t count the popular consumer-priced Boomtown brand, which includes about 20 percent DVV juice. Wahluke Wine Co. births it in Mattawa, Wash., and Johnson said they plan to grow Boomtown “aggressively” beyond its current production of 15,000 cases.

“It has allowed us to partner with a great winemaker in Gordon Hill, but we’re involved with all the blending, all the oaking and all the decisions,” Braunel said. “Our goal is to make the best \$15 bottle of Washington wine on the shelf.”

Last year also saw their Woodinville tasting gallery flourish and the hiring of chef Andrae Bopp, a refugee of Boise’s crumbling restaurant scene.

Next up is “Wallatage,” a 2007 two-barrel lot of Bordeaux varieties from the vineyards they farm or own — including 17 acres “in the rocks” adjacent to Cayuse Vineyards.

And, for the record, Wallatage rhymes with an artist’s collage, not heritage.

“Besides,” Johnson said, “the “ah” works better with the Sconni accent.” 🍷

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