

DON'T MISS Oregon wine harvest fell by 29% in 2020, but growth continues

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By *Eric Degerman* on November 12, 2021



Daniel Wampfler and his wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, took over the winemaking at Abeja in January 2016. (Photo courtesy of Abeja)

HOOD RIVER, Ore. — Judges at the 2021 Great Northwest Invitational Wine Competition thumbed their noses at the A-B-C crowd – “Anything but Chardonnay” – by voting [the Abeja 2020 Washington State Chardonnay](#) as the best wine of the two-day event.

A recount was required before Abeja’s flagship Chardonnay was declared the winner, a single vote separating it from the DeLille Cellars 2018 Harrison Hill Red Wine as the judging’s top wine.

The nine-year competition was staged last month at the historic Columbia Gorge Hotel for some of the Northwest’s top wine buyers, retailers and merchants.

“There’s a reason why Chardonnay is America’s favorite wine, in large part because growing conditions and winemaking decisions result in a wide variety of styles,” says Daniel Wampfler, who makes the wine at Abeja alongside his wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler.

“Amy and I seek to craft an elegant, textured Chard that pairs well with food. It requires an artisan touch. We couldn’t be more honored to have such a distinguished panel of judges give this kind of recognition to our wine, and the fact that the judges selected a Chardonnay as best of show makes the award even more special.”

Wampflers take key role in growth at Abeja



Daniel Wampfler and his wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler arrived at Abeja in January 2016. (Richard Duval Images)

The Wampflers took over the winemaking at Abeja on the heels of the 2015 crush, and they brought with them plenty of expertise with Chardonnay. Their showing at The Invite adds another delicious chapter.

Alvarez-Wampfler's résumé includes managing 10,000 barrels of Chardonnay at Columbia Crest. Her husband's career at Dunham Cellars included the popular Shirley Mays Chardonnay program.

"We truly are partners in all aspects of winemaking," Alvarez-Wampfler says. "We make picking, winemaking and blending decisions together. I have a special passion for Chardonnay, but we craft as one team."

In a 2018 interview with critic Owen Bargreen, Robert Campisi, who replaced Wampfler at Dunham, noted, "Their Chardonnay is amazing."

Ken and Ginger Harrison founded Abeja in 2000 with acclaimed winemaker Jon Abbott, and their collaboration immediately turned the brand and the century-old Walla Walla farmstead along Mill Creek Road into a wine country destination that came to be known as The Inn at Abeja. Abbott and his wife, Molly, moved on in 2015 to launch their Devona project. They live in Monmouth, Ore., yet continue to make wine in Walla Walla. (Devona received a gold medal at The Invite for its 2016 Champoux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon.)

In 2018, the Harrisons sold interest in the winery to a local partnership that includes Seattle businessman Arnie Prentice while John Oppenheimer of Columbia Hospitality in Seattle acquired majority interest in a partnership that owns the inn.

Chardonnay on display at new The Kitchen at Abeja



The Wampflers collaborate on the food and wine pairings at The Kitchen at Abeja with executive chef Elodie Li, a native of Kirkland, Wash. (Photo by Colby Kuschatka/Courtesy of Abeja)

Changes surrounding Abeja include the maturation of the Mill Creek Estate Vineyard and its increased role in the Washington State Chardonnay, which has involved Conner Lee and Celilo vineyards since Abbott's first vintage of Abeja Chardonnay in 2002. It's worth noting that the Woodward Canyon 2020 Chardonnay, another recipient of gold at The Invite, also incorporates fruit from Celilo.

"In addition to using more estate grapes in the wine, we purchased a concrete tank shortly after we arrived in 2016 and ferment a small amount of Chard in it each vintage for added texture and mouthfeel," Wampfler says. "Our cooper selection has also evolved over the years."

Earlier this year, Abeja opened up an on-premise restaurant to non-guests of the inn by launching The Kitchen at Abeja. Features include a wine-pairing menu beyond its standard five or seven-course prix fixe options. **Executive chef Elodie Li**, a native of Kirkland, Wash., who spent two years at Michelin star restaurants in Provence, works with the Wampflers on the restaurant pairings.

"We sometimes serve crab salad with the Washington State Chardonnay at The Kitchen at Abeja, and it's killer," Alvarez-Wampfler says. "At home, Dan and I like to pair this wine with *albondigas*, a Mexican meatball soup. It's a special family dinner, perfect on a cold fall or winter night."

While the 2020 Estate Chardonnay won't be released to Abeja list members until spring 2022, their state cuvée — judged to be one of the best wines in the Northwest — has an ample production level of nearly 800 cases.

"A limited amount of our 2020 WA State Chardonnay is available at the winery, but it should be reasonably easy to find in the high-end wine shops around the Northwest," Wampfler says.