

Abeja Winery And Inn: 2023 Washington Winery Of The Year

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Daniel Wampfler, and his winemaking wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, toast the production facility they spent five years designing for Abeja. Their winemaking and hospitality prompted Great Northwest Wine to select Abeja Winery & Inn as the 2023 Washington Winery of the Year. (Richard Duval Images)

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — When talking about the premier producers in the Pacific Northwest who work with the nation's three most popular varieties — Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot — any serious buzz must include [Abeja Winery & Inn](#).

Ken and Ginger Harrison set the standard for a destination winery when they launched Abeja in 2000 across a century-old farmstead. Their quiet recruitment in 2015 of Daniel Wampfler and his winemaking wife, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, resulted in new heights for the wines and the estate.

That excellence has been repeatedly revealed via recent blind judgments conducted by Great Northwest Wine, prompting the selection of Abeja as the 2023 Washington Winery of the Year.

“I joke, but it’s true — we won the winemaking lottery to be here with this foundation of hospitality, the property, the vineyards, the inn and the winemaking facility,” Daniel says. “The icing on the cake for me is to work with my spouse and navigate wine production together.”

And the Wampflers seem to be the gold standard for spouses working side-by-side in a cellar.

Abeja’s 2019 Columbia Valley Merlot proved to be one of the top releases of the variety last year, starting with its No. 1 finish atop a field of 114 entries in a Great Northwest Wine comparative tasting of Merlot.

Eight months later, it received a Double Platinum and 97 points at the 23rd annual Platinum Awards, a judging which requires a gold medal to qualify.

At the Great Northwest Invitational, an October judging staged on behalf of West Coast sommeliers and wine buyers, the 2021 Washington State Chardonnay was best of class and earned the No. 2 ranking on The Seattle Times list for Best Northwest Wines of 2022. The praise for that bottling exemplifies the delicious consistency of the Wampflers’ focused efforts because the Abeja 2020 Washington State Chardonnay won best of show the year before at the Great Northwest Invite. Abeja’s flagship 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon received a gold medal at the 2022 Invite held in Hood River, Ore.

“We’ve been spoiled with great grapes and great equipment and great teams over the years,” Daniel says. “We don’t even own a boat, much less a boatload of money to start our own winery, but to have this place to hone our craft is pretty incredible.”



Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, and her husband, Daniel, share the winemaking duties at Abeja. (Richard Duval Images)

Ste. Michelle Grads Take Abeja To Next Level

The Wampflers arrived at Abeja — named for a Spanish reference to *bees* — with impressive *résumés*. Daniel was part of the Columbia Crest winemaking team that turned its 2005 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon into Wine Spectator's No. 1 wine of the world in 2009. It was the first and only time a Washington wine topped Spectator's year-end list.

Amy's history at Columbia Crest included overseeing the Chardonnay program and its 10,000 barrels. When it came to her future husband, however, it wasn't quite love at first sight for Amy, who grew up in the Yakima Valley with farming in her blood.

"He's very smart, very articulate — and he can dance," she says with a smile. "He will dance in the cellar. He's super funny and always thinking outside of the box. We are always having fun.

He is a quick-witted jokester with a penchant for quoting lines from the movie *Caddyshack*. Somehow, he was raised in Michigan to root for Notre Dame football by his father, a career chemist for Dow. Daniel's mother worked as a nurse before she went back to school and earned an English degree focused on children's literature.

"I started brewing beer when I was 15 and fell in love with fermentation science," he says. "I thought about being a chemist, but I didn't want to wear a white lab coat for the rest of my life."

By 2003, he graduated from Michigan State with two degrees, which explains the T-shirt autographed by men's basketball coach Tom Izzo proudly displayed in Daniel's tidy office. And after college internships at wineries, Daniel got hired by Stimson Lane — now Ste. Michelle Wine Estates — as a research winemaker.

He shared an office for several years with Juan Muñoz-Oca, who recently resigned as the chief winemaker for Ste. Michelle. He also learned from working in the Horse Heaven Hills alongside Ron Bunnell, Bob Bertheau, Ray Einberger, Keith Pilgrim and the late Paula Eakin, who died last winter.

In 2008, the late Eric Dunham recruited Daniel to take over the winemaking at Dunham Cellars. A few months later, Wine Press Northwest magazine named Dunham Cellars as the Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year.

In 2010, Amy left Columbia Crest to run Sinclair Estate Vineyards in Walla Walla. After eight award-winning years with the Dunham and Blair families, the Harrisons approached Daniel with a dream neither he nor Amy saw coming at a property they respected immensely.

"The opportunity to make wine with Amy was the one thing missing in my life, and there was a bit of a precedent at Abeja because John Abbott made the wine for the Harrisons and his wife, Molly, oversaw the hospitality," Daniel points out.

Amy adds, "I was happy at Sinclair, and Dan didn't want to leave Dunham, but the more we got to know Ken and Ginger and their family and the opportunity to be at Abeja, we fell in love with the idea."

The Wampflers team up to oversee every phase of the Abeja operation — 65 acres of estate vines across three parcels, more than a dozen of the Columbia Valley's top growers, the operation of The Inn at Abeja, the culinary program, direct-to-consumer sales, the tasting room and what goes into every bottle.

"We make all the winemaking decisions together," Daniel says. "The rest of the business we divide — and Amy conquers."



Michigan native Daniel Wampfler stands in the 12-acre Mill Creek Estate Vineyard, which was established with Viognier and Syrah before the turn of the century. Chardonnay and Merlot were added in 2006. (Richard Duval Images)

Their success has been reflected in growth and expansion. When the Wampflers arrived, Abeja produced 5,000 cases. Last year, they bottled 12,200 cases as Abeja's vineyard sources continue to mature. There will be more estate plantings in 2023, which will account for the projected increase to around 15,000 cases, about triple from their first year.

The Abeja neighborhood has acquired fame along the way by attracting the likes of Jackson Family Wines, the Figgins family, Charles Smith and Doug Frost — the Master of Wine and Master Sommelier who flies in frequently from Kansas City to oversee his young Echolands project. (Abeja sold 61 acres, including 40 acres of vines, to the Jackson group.)

And starting in 2020, Daniel moved production of the boutique Pursued by Bear wines for actor Kyle MacLachlan to Abeja.

"Kyle is family to us, and I appreciate ownership for their understanding and trust," Daniel says.

The family approach that began with the Harrisons helps the Wampflers manage their own household.

"The dogs come to work with us, and our kids work here," Amy says. "And our daughter will come and hang out in our office after school."

Daniel points out, "We've gained more time together, but it's time together at work."

The Kitchen At Abeja Open To Public By Reservation



Executive chef Jake Crenshaw enters his second year leading The Kitchen at Abeja, which is open for dinner to the public by reservation only on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. (Richard Duval Images)

It's obvious the Wampflers dote on every lot of wine, yet they rarely create a new category. Those few special offerings are limited to the mailing list or The Kitchen at Abeja menu.

“Many of them are sold out almost by the time everyone on the mailing list opens their mail,” Daniel says. “We do get to play around a little and tease out a bit. For example, we will have guests who tell us, ‘I didn’t know you guys did Pinot Noir!’, but you have come here to know that. And you have to be dining here.”

An appointment is required to taste the wines, and reservations are required for The Kitchen at Abeja, but you don’t need to be a guest at The Inn or a list member.

The Kitchen is open evenings on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and now there’s a strong local flavor with executive chef Jake Crenshaw over the stove. His history features a number of the Walla Walla Valley’s best-known restaurants, including Eritage, Tom Maccarone’s TMACS and owner/chef of Olive Marketplace and the Saint & the Sinner.

Essentially, everything presented to a guest is prepared by Crenshaw and his team.

“Except the fish doesn’t come from our pond,” Daniel quips.

On the wine list, brightness remains the focus inside the bottle as the Wampflers and their team think of the dining table and the cellar.

“Because of where we’ve worked, large and small, we know what we could do in the cellar,” Daniel says. “We could make this sultry and sexy Cabernet, but those aren’t the wines we are trying to produce.”

Hospitality, Ambiance Adds To Appeal Of Abeja



Abeja might be best known for its Cabernet Sauvignon program, but the Merlot, Chardonnay and Viognier produced by the Wampflers also rank alongside the best in the Pacific Northwest. (Richard Duval Images)

In 2018, the Harrisons sold majority interest in the winery and The Inn at Abeja to a pair of investment groups. The winery investment group includes Seattle businessman Arnie Prentice, while the inn investment group includes John Oppenheimer — founder and CEO of Seattle-based Columbia Hospitality, which manages the eight-suite inn alongside the Wampflers and their team.

“We’ve created seven new departments, including our own viticulture department so we farm our own fruit, a national sales director and a culinary team,” Daniel says. “We’ve grown from 17 full-time employees in the last seven years to over 40 full-time employees with benefits the same as we have.”

Among the special wines to explore at Abeja is the Viognier — a benchmark for West Coast producers that ages remarkably. That is person-ified by the 2016 Estate Viognier, the first wine Daniel and Amy crafted at Abeja.

“We picked it early for freshness, and it sold out in three months,” Daniel said.

Since arriving seven years ago, the demand for Abeja’s wines remains intense. That explains a waiting list to be on Abeja’s mailing list, the recent construction of a state-of-the-art winemaking facility, new estate plantings across Mill Creek Road and the construction of as many as eight guest suites. Most weekends spring through fall are booked 12 months in advance.

Yet the Wampflers know that despite expansion, the expectation to maintain the Abeja standards and personal touch remain.

“We can be giving a tour one minute and then turn around and be on a tractor hauling Viognier to the press, the next minute, we’re working on the budget,” Daniel says. “It’s so dynamic when you have a challenge around every corner and every minute.”

- Abeja, 2014 Mill Creek Road, Walla Walla, WA 99362, Abeja.net, 509-526-7400 (winery), 509-522-1234 (lodging).