

## Deep Dive



### A Splendid Tour & Tasting at Abeja

Though many excellent dining and lodging options for visitors heading to the Walla Walla Valley have sprung up in recent years, the Inn at Abeja continues to set the standard for excellence. I had the great pleasure of touring the property with Daniel Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, who share winemaking and overall General Manager responsibilities. Under their guidance over the past seven years, the property has been expanded, a new winemaking/laboratory/barrel storage facility added, a full kitchen with Executive Chef Jake Crenshaw has opened and a new vineyard – Skysill – is being developed.

Having not been to the property in quite some time, I was gobsmacked at all the improvements.

My first visit was way back in June of 2000. I was on a Washington Wine Commission tour with an overnight stay in Walla Walla. Back then there were no more than a dozen wineries in the valley, and the Walla Walla we know and love today had just begun gestating. Pre-Abeja the property was a homespun B&B run by a young couple (the Finches I believe) who had taken on the old farmstead and begun renovating it. The central farm building was being rented by a couple of winery startups, including one from Rusty Figgins dedicated to Syrah. Rustic was the theme here, but the bucolic charm of the place was immediately apparent.

I was so taken with it that I returned with friends a few months later, and found that it had been sold and was about to be transformed into something much grander. In the years since I've seen a number of winemakers pass through its big barn doors, followed the planting of estate vineyards and the opening of a dedicated Abeja winery. The once-humble B&B has blossomed into a much-in-demand site for weddings, corporate retreats and family celebrations. The estate winery built a reputation for excellence under the guidance of John and Molly Abbott, and my visit and tasting with Daniel and Amy confirmed that in the seven vintages since they took the reins the quality of the wines has never been anything less than brilliant.

If you are looking to stay overnight you'd better be planning pretty far ahead, but other tasting and dining options are open for booking. Several tasting experiences (with various food options, and some including a property tour and reserve-level wines) are [available](#). Chef Jake Crenshaw, a familiar name to those of us who have dined around town, now runs the kitchen, which serves Abeja guests throughout the week but is also open for prix fixe dinner reservations Thursday through Saturday. With Abeja wines of course.

A quick look at the website's listing of current releases can be a bit disheartening as most are sold out. But three new Spring Release wines are available, and I will post up my full tasting notes in a day or two. Word to the wise – join the mailing list to get a crack at the more limited offerings from the estate vineyards.

For Spring Release the three featured wines include a 2021 Washington [Chardonnay](#) (\$48) that draws its grapes from Celilo, Conner Lee and the estate vineyard. As you'd expect, an exceptional and delicious wine. It is joined by a 2020 Columbia Valley [Merlot](#) (\$55) fresh off 22 months in one third new French oak; and a 2019 Columbia Valley [Cabernet Sauvignon](#) (\$68) that is a full-on Bordeaux-style blend including 14% Merlot and splashes of Cab Franc and Petit Verdot. Look for full reviews and scores on Substack.

A new vineyard is being developed west of the winery and east of Highway 12, with spectacular views from the top at 1600+ feet elevation. Adjacent is the new vineyard for the Jackson Family, and looking a bit northeast you can see the new Figgins winery and caves, due to open later this year. Another major player developing a vineyard and winery nearby is Doug Frost's Echolands project. In sum, the whole area is as exciting as it gets in Walla Walla.

Over a most relaxed luncheon tasting I asked Dan and Amy, who share winemaking (and many other) duties at Abeja, what each brought to the task. Dan quickly spoke up. "Amy brings brains, beauty and talent" he enthused, "and I bring Amy."

In a follow-up email they added this: "Amy and Daniel make ALL winemaking decisions together. Although Amy has a passion for Chardonnay and Daniel an affinity for Cabernet, they collaborate in lockstep from start to finish on picking decisions, fermentation techniques, barrel choices, blending decisions and bottling efforts, to name a few. Most winemaking teams consist of more than one teammate, it just so happens that Amy and Daniel fell in love with wine individually, and after meeting [while working at Columbia Crest] fell further in love with each other. Outside of managing vineyards and winemaking they divide and conquer their co-General Manager responsibilities."

In their typically generous spirit they credit their "full and talented team" for making it all possible "because after all it's the collective passion that yields a greater whole than the sum of its parts."

Thank you Amy and Daniel for all you do, and do so very well!