

WASHINGTON

FALL 2011

# TASTING ROOM<sup>®</sup>

The magazine for people who love wine tasting

## WINE COUNTRY IN FALL

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# OF GOLDEN *friendships*

WRITER *Kirsten Telander*

Cast with modern day *heroes* and legendary *trailblazers*, MERCER ESTATES is an *epic story* of two families—*the Hagues and Mercers*—whose century-old farming roots lay at the heart of this *first-rate winery*

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Rob Mercer with Mike Hogue and David Forsyth of Mercer Estates at Schwartzman Vineyard, the first Riesling vineyard that Mike Hogue planted in 1976.



The eco-friendly tasting room offers a peaceful patio setting with paths that meander through the garden and nearby vineyards.

**i**MAGINE Italy's Barone Ricasoli, the oldest family run winery in the world, partnering with the second oldest, Marchesi Antinori.

Or France's Domaine Jean-Louis Chave family collaborating with Maison Trimbach. Meet Washington's contemporary version: the Mercer and Hogue families with the creation of Mercer Estates.

There are pioneers that give birth to every wine region and for Washington state that person was the late Dr. Walter Clore, whom with rancher Don Mercer, planted the first wine grape vineyards on Horse Heaven Hills in 1972. And Clore's equally forward-thinking student? Mike Hogue.

Similar to Clore, Mike's farming began with other crops. The son of a hop farmer, Mike's father turned to Concord grapes, the upcoming thing to plant in the 60's. "I met Walt while I was learning to farm those Concord grapes from my dad," says Hogue.

At the recent grand opening for The Walter Clore Wine and Culinary Center's outdoor event facility (part of the exciting agri-tourism and education center project underway in Prosser) in which Hogue serves as co-chair, he spoke of his memories of Clore, "He was so far ahead of everyone else. His biggest job was convincing farmers to plant wine grapes and he finally accomplished that."

#### THE SALE OF HOGUE CELLARS

With Clore as a mentor, Mike Hogue went on to plant vines that resulted in The Hogue Cellars,

which became a household name in Washington State and beyond.

In 2001, he sold the winery to Canadian wine giant, Vincor International. Vincor was in turn purchased by Constellation Brands a few years later.

When Mike was asked what prompted him to get back into the wine business, he recalls, "My daughter and son-in-law (Barb and Ron Harle) came into the office one day and said they'd like to get back into the business and partner with the Mercers. I knew immediately that partnering with the Mercers (a family the Hogue's grew up with) would be a great experience."

#### THE BIRTH OF MERCER ESTATES

When the five-year no-compete clause from The Hogue Cellars winery sale expired, Hogue joined forces with the Mercer family and brought along veteran winemaker from Hogue Cellars, David Forsyth, to head up the winemaking team at Mercer Estates.

Years after Mike Hogue's departure, there's still confusion among consumers who associate him with Hogue Cellars. Forsyth laughs, "We're still trying to make the distinction that Mike, along with the late Bud Mercer, is behind Mercer Estates. It's confusing because he still has his name (Hogue) up on their winery." The Constellation-owned Hogue Cellars is, in fact, a grapes throw from Mercer Estates on Lee Road in Prosser. »

#### TASTING ROOM PICKS



#### TRY THESE RELEASES FROM MERCER ESTATES

**Mercer 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon**  
Cassis and toasted oak mingle with ripe cherry and cocoa aromas, and continue on the palate with subtle notes of forest floor, sweet earth and spice. **\$23.99**

**Mercer 2008 Merlot**  
Aromas of cherry, kirshwasser and cassis, with hints of cocoa, vanilla and allspice. Flavors of spiced berry fruit come alive in this full-bodied, structured wine. **\$23.99**

**Mercer 2009 Pinot Gris**  
Fresh melon and peach aromas, and flavors enhanced by herb and orange peel components, a rich mouth-feel. **\$13.99**

**Mercer 2008 Petit Verdot**  
Exotic nose of mixed berries, lilac and sage leads into a rich, supple taste that finishes with smooth silky tannins. **\$29.99** (Only at the tasting room)



We not only want to be *sustainable* on our farms, but sustainable in our communities. *Long-term* thinking isn't easy, but it is required to be a *good steward*.

ROB MERCER, Mercer Estates



At Mercer Estates, wine flights are popular in the tasting room decorated with art, wine barrel furniture, and family photos.

Carma's Vineyard located next to the winery was named after Rob Mercer's pioneering grandmother.

**Visit Mercer Estates**

3100 Lee Rd, Prosser WA

GET HERE Exit 82 off of Interstate 82, between Yakima and the Tri-Cities.

PHONE 509-786-2097  
www.mercerwine.com

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But it's human nature to question whether such a partnership could be so perfect. Dueling families are what make for great literature, or a television mini-series.

To the contrary, says Hogue, "What's been the best thing about the Mercer and Hogue partnership is when you partner with somebody, you spend a lot more time with them," referring fondly to his time with Bud Mercer, whom Hogue considered a rock star.

With Bud gone (he passed away in 2010), his son Rob Mercer and his wife Brenda have become the driving force behind Mercer Estates, along with Ron and Barb Harle, who bring years of experience from The Hogue Cellars.

"I'm just glad to help where I can," says Mike Hogue, reluctant to take any credit for his longtime contribution to the now world-recognized Washington wine country.

Similarly, David Forsyth, a former member of the U.S. Skydiving team, must have left his ego in the stratosphere. "David doesn't brag about himself," says Hogue. "He wants you to judge him by his wines. His winemaking—I haven't seen any other like it. Consistency? You can trust Mercer Estates, and that is David Forsyth."

Forsyth, with his trustworthy Harry Dean Stanton voice, and mountaineering guide look, has similar sentiments towards Mike. "The wine business has a lot of egos, from the owners to the winemakers, but Mike Hogue is the nicest guy you could meet," Forsyth says with all sincerity. "There



aren't too many people I'd want to enter a business relationship with, but I've had 20 years with Mike Hogue so I know it works."

So who is willing to take the credit for this impressive effort? Where's the infighting? The juicy mini-series? Not with the Mercers.

Rob Mercer confirms, "The Mercer and Hogue families have been family friends for generations. Family and friends are what the wine industry is all about. The product of our labor is

intended to bring people closer together, so our partnership is a natural expression of what is at the heart of our industry."

**ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS**

Both the Mercer and Hogue families are well known for their tireless and continuous involvement and contributions to not just the wine industry, but to their communities.

Mike attributes this drive to his parents. His father was the mayor of Prosser, while remaining "colorful, friendly and passionate," Mike emphasizes. Before that, he was on the Prosser Memorial Hospital Board, among other involvements. "We've been lucky as a family and the idea was that if you are lucky enough to give back, you just don't take," Mike says.

Rob echoes Mike's sentiments. "Giving back to the community is a shared tenet and something that makes the fun of success that much more rewarding."

Before sustainability became a buzz word in the industry, both families have been working that way for generations now. "They used to call it conservation," Forsyth laughs. "The Hogue, and especially the Mercer family, have been working the same ground for over 100 years, by all terms sustainable."

Mercer Estates has been recognized for their environmentally conscious practices, most recently from the Association of Washington Business, presenting the winery with the 2010 Environmental Excellence Award.

**TASTE, TOUR, RELAX**

The modern, fashionable tasting room reminds visitors of its historical roots, with walls dedicated to vintage black and white photos of both the Hogue and Mercer family members.

When asked what makes the merger of the two families beneficial to the wines, Rob responds, "The Hogue/Harle Family vineyards bring the Yakima Valley AVA, and the Mercer Family vineyards bring the Horse Heaven Hills AVA into the partnership. This makes the quality and diversity of the wines which we can produce from our own vineyards fairly unique in the state."

From this diversity, Forsyth states his goals: "It's all about balance, finesse, drinkability. The wines are not going to be overpowering, they're not going to be overripe, not over alcoholic, not over-oaked. They're meant to be enjoyed with food. Their balance, acidity and fruit concentration lend itself to that."

One of the more intriguing sites that Forsyth

works with is Mercer Spice Cabinet Vineyard. As the name might connote, the small site is planted to Grenache, Syrah, Petit Syrah, Mourvedre, Petit Verdot, Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec—every varietal you'd want for spice notes.

Mercer Estates has a tasty, exciting line-up of both whites and reds, some you won't find outside the tasting room, and none exceeding \$30. They've managed to bridge the gap between chic and eco-friendly with the design of the facility. But perhaps most alluring is the accessibility; there are no closed doors. Guests are encouraged to poke around the barrel room and ask as many questions as they can drum up.

"We've set up the winery to engage people when they come here. We want to take visitors on tours," says Forsyth. "We want to keep it small, we want to educate one-on-one."

They've also set up the property for relaxing in barrel stave furniture (made by Forsyth's son), and for ambling down paths, one ending up in Carma's Vineyard, a sweet little block of Pinot Gris dedicated to Rob's grandmother. Not surprisingly, Carma was a self-made woman, breaking ground up on the Horse Heaven Hills in the late 1800's and the family has been ranching and farming there ever since.

What does the future hold for Mercer Estates? No scandalous novel or film, just more forward-thinking and solid wines.

"The agricultural mind-set is geared toward generational thinking," says Rob. "We not only want to be sustainable on our farms, but sustainable in our communities. Long-term thinking isn't easy, but it is required to be a good steward." 🍇