Johan and Cowhorn vineyards: Passion for biodynamic wines

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

Katherine “Mini” Banks has packed a lot of business and winery experience into her 27 years.

Today, with her aunt, Tricia Russell, as partner, she’s the owner of two Oregon wineries — Johan Vineyards in the Willamette Valley north of Rickreall, and Cowhorn Vineyard in the Applegate Valley near Jacksonville.

The two wineries are separated by 240 miles, but they are united in dedication to biodynamic viticulture.

Banks said she relies on her expert teams — mostly women — to create wine from vineyards that were already producing award-winners before she took over.

In addition, she brings her own brand of panache to the operation. Her parents, Charles and Ali Banks, were investors in international wineries before she was in kindergarten. Banks’ earliest memories were of working harvests and celebrating holidays with her extended family at vineyard properties in California, New Zealand and South Africa.

“I grew up immersed in it,” she said.

Two years ago, she married Dillon Byers, who handles the business side of her wineries.

Mini Banks didn’t immediately embrace the family business. She went to New York to study the fashion business at Parsons School of Design, eventually landing communications work at Gwyneth Paltrow’s “Goop.” Although she loved the work, she said New York was not a good fit for her.

Winery and vineyard management began to look very appealing after a trip to Oregon in 2021, when she visited Bill and Barb Steele, owners of the 117-acre Cowhorn Vineyard property. Banks and her aunt are now the owners.

The dust had barely settled on the Cowhorn sale when Banks heard Johan Vineyards were for sale, and purchased that winery as well. Dag Johan Sundby had purchased the 176-acre vineyard, planted on 63 acres north of Rickreall, in 2005, then added 25 acres of vines before selling it to Banks.

“Brigadoon is supposed to be that place you find peace and serenity all around you. This is our place away from the rest of the world. “It was a big decision to share it with the world,” she added.

That decision led to building the winery and Matt joining the family business as the winemaker.

“It was very lucky Matt wanted to make wine, and he wanted to make wine with us,” Sheree said.

Brigadoon’s first vintage in 2008 consisted of 150 cases. The winery is now producing 1,500 cases a year with a goal of increasing to 2,000 to 2,500 cases annually, using both its grapes and some purchased from other Lane County vineyards.

That first vintage in 2008 became available at the same time the Great Recession hit, but Brigadoon survived because it was small and the three family members were able to do the necessary work themselves. The winery’s case volume has increased annually since.

Chris’ experience in growing winegrapes came from having grown up on his parents’ small vineyard and winery in California’s Napa Valley. During his teen years he worked in the vineyard, and after college, in 1979, he returned to the family business.

That same year, he married Sheree.

The couple moved north to Lane County in 1990, purchased property in 1991 and started planting grape stock in 1992. Both had full-time jobs off the property. Chris worked for a fertilizer plant until retiring to the vineyard full-time in 2004. Sheree was a high school English teacher until retiring in 2020.