Kraemer Vineyards: Growing with the family

By BRENNA WIEGAND
For the Capital Press

MT. ANGEL, Ore. — In the century since Peter Kraemer immigrated from Germany to Oregon’s Willamette Valley, the Kraemer family has stayed put, building ag-related businesses throughout the region.

The farm was built on berries and row crops, but the family’s penchant for diversity has resulted in a vineyard program that has become the crown jewel of Kraemer Farms in Mt. Angel, Ore., and one of the largest family-owned vineyard operations in the Willamette Valley.

Dan Kraemer’s interest in wine grapes was piqued in the 1980s after caring for a neighbor’s vineyard in exchange for land on which to run cattle.

A few years later, they bought that vineyard and began establishing Kraemer Vineyards and began planting with a momentum that skyrocketed wine grapes into the upper echelons of the multifaceted farm.

After Dan’s untimely death six years ago at age 56, his sons, Ben and Austin, stepped up and took charge of that division.

“People thought it was kind of crazy to plant grapes that low in the Valley with its dangers of frost and what-not, but it’s fun to see what else we can grow here in the East Valley where we have a different micro-climate than the West side,” Austin Kraemer said. “This gives us the confidence to try growing varietals like Albarino and Sauvignon blanc.”

“We grow grapes on about 15 different soil types across our vineyards,” Ben Kraemer said. “A lot of people are noticing that some of our soils hold moisture much better than most.”

Their current pet projects are Sauvignon blanc and Gamay noir. Their Sauvignon blanc is already going into labels for several Willamette Valley wineries, and in the coming year they will be testing the market for Gamay.

Ben and Austin grew up watching their dad and grandfather Harold at work.

“As we drove around, Dad was always teaching us,” Ben said. “Now my brother and I are driving around taking care of the same grapes.”

Behind their continued success is a wealth of experience and the brothers’ wish to keep the family legacy alive.

“We want to make our dad and our grandpa proud and to keep it all together for our kids,” Austin said.

While Austin cultivates relationships with more than 20 wineries, many who’ve been customers over two decades, and Ben works on several ranches, each including hundreds of acres, the two work diligently on all other aspects of the operation.

“It’s stressful trying to estimate our harvest and walking the line of making sure you sell all your fruit without overcommitting,” Austin said. “Thankfully we are blessed with excellent managers who are truly part of the family.”

Celestino Rueda, head vineyard foreman, and Alfonso Vega, irrigation foreman, have both been on the farm for more than 40 years, having started in their late teens.

Rueda planted some of the first grapes in the Valley, and, when it comes to irrigation, Alfonso knows all, Austin said.

As they continue to expand, efficiency is of the essence.

The recent acquisition of a Pellenc sprayer allowed them to eliminate four tractors.

“As the cost of farming continues to increase, the way to keep growing great fruit and offering a fair price to winemakers is through smart management and ongoing mechanization,” Austin said. “Despite the cost of the Pellenc sprayer, it will more than pencil out within the next few years.”

Tagaris Winery: Variety is the spice of winemaking

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

RICHLAND, Wash. — Travelers can stop at Tulip Lane in Richland for a unique wine experience.

That is where Tagaris Winery has a tasting room and restaurant and hosts a summer concert series May to September.

Restaurant manager Martha Otano says the owner, Michael Taggares, started the winery in 1987 after having established his first vineyard in 1983.

“Michael’s grandfather came to America from Greece when he was 17 and planted grapes. Now the Taggares family has more than 1,400 acres in the Columbia Valley and Wahluke Slope AVAs,” she said.

The name of the winery honours the proper Greek spelling of the family name.

Tagaris Winery is the result of three generations of grape growers in Eastern Washington, where climate and soil reminded them of their Greek homeland.

Today the grapes are grown in several vineyards planted with 27 varietals. All of the vineyards are at a latitude of 46 degrees north, similar to the Bordeaux region of France.

Arete Vineyard is 250 acres at Radar Hill near Othello, in the Columbia Valley AVA, and was planted in 1983. Varietals produced at Arete on its south slope are Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah.

The north slope produces Gewürztraminer, Muller-Thurgau, Chenin Blanc and Riesling. Most of the plantings are organic.

Aliced Vineyard in the Wahluke Slope AVA is named after the owner’s daughter, is 40 acres in the Wahluke Slope AVA and has multiple clones of Cabernet Sauvignon, planted in 2017.

Lee Palomo vineyard is 25 acres, planted on the owner’s former airplane runway.

Varietals produced are Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Grenache noir, Malbec and Tempranillo.

Michael Taggares is 250 acres in the Wahluke Slope AVA at a 900-foot elevation on a south-facing slope to the Columbia River. Referred to as the Spice Cabinet, it produces Barbera, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Carmenere, Cinsault, Merlot, Muscat Canelli, Nebbiolo, petit Sirah and Sangiovese.

Walker Vineyard is 40 acres and named after the owner’s son. It contains Clone 33 and produces Cabernet Sauvignon.

Tagaris Winery moved into its new winery facility in 2005 and was soon turning 4,000 tons of grapes into wine. The winery is attached to the Tavern — the Greek word for a small, intimate restaurant serving wine and playing music.

“We pair all our food with our wine. The tavern bar serves as the tasting room during the day and wines can also be tasted at dinner with the meal,” Martha said.

The winemaker is Frank Roth, who has a great talent for creating wines that complement the food, Martha said.

“He’s been here for 17 years,” she said.

His goal at Tagaris is to become the premiere authority for making wine using as little oak as possible so the vibrant fruit flavors of the wine shine.

“Tagaris’ wine club is one of the main ways we market our 27 different varietals. We also have a large selection of organic wines — one of the largest selections in the state,” Martha said.

The Tagaris family’s primary focus is sustainability.

Adopting environmentally and socially responsible practices and making them an integral part of how they do business is a way to ensure the health of their land, communities, employees and industry for generations to come.

“Currently Michael is in the process of teaching the business to his children — Walker and Kennedy — sharing everything from growing the grapes to winemaking,” Martha said. “They are an amazing family to work for, and they treat their employees very well.”