Hamilton Cellars: Perseverance makes winery a reality

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

BENTON CITY, Wash. — This unique winery in the heart of the Columbia Valley — home of the finest vineyards in Washington state — began as the retirement project of Stacie and Russ Hamilton.

They’d both had successful careers — she was a certified public accountant and he’d been an engineer in the oil industry and took early retirement — and wanted to do something different.

They liked to travel and visit wineries and decided to go into the wine business.

They got started in 2006 when they were enjoying a wine tasting near Walla Walla and realized that is what they wanted to do.

Earlier, Russ had been hired by a Norwegian company to solve problems in Moses Lake, where they were trying to build a better production plant. He became famous in that industry and when his contract was finished he worked in China for three years, building a large silicone manufacturing plant, and then for a South Korean company for two years, accumulating enough money to build their winery.

Larry Stanley started working in their tasting room and later became general manager of their winery.

“They hired Charlie Hoppes to be their winemaker, because they were a big fan of his,” Larry said.

Hoppes is regarded as one of the nation’s finest winemakers. After graduating from the University of California-Davis in 1988, he spent more than 30 years as a leading winemaker for several noted Washington wineries. Hoppes has now worked with Hamilton Cellars on the front of the Korbel winery in Guerneville, Calif.

Korbel Champagne Cellars: Making ‘sparklers’ since 1882

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

GUERNEVILLE, Calif. — The COVID outbreak had a big impact on Korbel Champagne Cellars — sales were up.

“At the store level, consumers wanted brands that they knew and trusted,” said Margie Healy, Korbel’s vice president of communications. “With Korbel’s in-store availability and long history, Korbel grew.”

The winery was founded by the Korbel Family in Sonoma County in 1882 and has had only one other owner, the Heck Family, since 1954. It is the No. 1 domestic premium sparkling wine in the U.S., and has over 90% brand awareness among consumers.

Since its founding, Korbel has manufactured champagne, using the méthode champenoise process. In this process, the sparkling wine is fermented in the bottle.

Korbel has scrupulously followed regulations — both in letter and in spirit — regarding the use of the word “champagne” on wines made and marketed in the United States. The regulations were established by the Department of the Treasury in the 1930s and allow U.S. producers to use names of geographical significance that also designate a class or type of wine.

The Korbel Cellars produces champagne and brandy on 1,000 acres around California. Heck Cellars in Arvin, Calif., is Korbel’s grape and brandy processing and storage facility.

Korbel’s brandy has a particularly strong following in Wisconsin, where over 50% of the company’s production is consumed. A limited amount of still wine is sold only through the tasting room and online at Korbel.com. Seven limited production “sparklers” are also available exclusively at the Korbel tasting room and wine shop.

The winery is open to the public daily for tours with tastings by reservation.

The true measure of Korbel’s success during its 141 years can be seen in the impact it has had on American consumers and its presence at various celebrations throughout the years, including the last 10 presidential inaugurations.

“I am sure the founders would be very proud that their vision over 141 years ago of producing a quality ‘sparkler’ is still going strong today,” she said. “The winery continues to be good stewards of the land, producing a quality ‘sparkler’ with an affordable price point for all to enjoy.”

Healy says changes are planned for the winery in the future. Sustainability tops the list as workers continue to strive for efficiency in the vineyards, winemaking production and maintaining its position in the marketplace.

The biggest challenge facing the California wine industry is regulation and taxation, she said.

More surprises came in response to the question: Are customers drinking more Korbel today than in the past five years?

Healy said, “Yes, not just drinking more, but consumers are finding more occasions to consume Korbel. Long gone are the days that Korbel is just for special occasions. This is driven by mixability, mostly with brunch (for mimosas) driving the consumption.”