

Myles Ahead: 25 years of Enology and Viticulture at WWCC

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
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From left to right, Myles and Myrna Anderson with Martin Fujishin in the tasting room at College Cellars in January. Bottles of student wine for sale and tasting, made from grapes in the teaching vineyards, are on the wall behind them.
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MORE INFORMATION



The Rootstock: How WWCC's Center for Enology and Viticulture came to be

This is the first of a three-part series.

In the year 2000, Walla Walla wine had come a long way. Thanks to pioneering wineries such as Leonetti and Woodward Canyon and their steady stream of glowing press, Walla Walla was officially on the wine map. It had its own designated AVA (American Viticulture Area) and counted over 20 wineries, with high-profile projects like Long Shadows waiting in the wings. Things were on the up and up.

Still, something was missing, thought Dr. Myles Anderson, co-founder of the eighth oldest winery in the area, Walla Walla Vintners.



Lift off: The graduates pushing Washington wine to new heights

The year before, in 1999, Anderson, who was a teaching psychologist and instructor at the Walla Walla Community College, surveyed the local industry—a cohort of founding wineries that included L'Ecole 41, Seven Hills, Waterbrook, Woodward Canyon, and Leonetti, among others—to assess the need for training and education in viticulture and enology.

“Of course, everyone said definitely!” Anderson says.

And so, 25 years ago, as Founding Director, Anderson launched the first classes of the Walla Walla Community College’s Institute for Enology and Viticulture. By 2002, the center’s first graduates had completed their studies. By 2003, the main building at the corner of East Isaacs

Ave and Tausick Way, which would grow to 15,000 square feet to house classrooms, a crush pad, a wine cellar, tank and barrel rooms, a teaching winery, office space, laboratories, and a commercial kitchen, would be complete.

“It was a high risk leap to do it,” Anderson says. For it to succeed and continue to attract students and funding to keep it going, it was critical “to have the support of the wine community first. That was the most important thing.”

Luckily, Anderson had it. He developed a job-ready curriculum—a hands-on, two-year associate degree

in Enology and Viticulture where students learn how to ferment, analyze, blend and bottle wine; propagate, prune, and grow grape vines; and even how to operate a pump, drive a forklift, and manage a wine business—based on the industry’s specific requests.

“The people in the focus group interviews told me what they wanted,” Anderson says. “They were looking for someone to train people in viticulture first, and enology second. And they wanted to make sure that when the person graduated, they could go and be a winemaker, be a tasting room manager, that they were completely put together.”

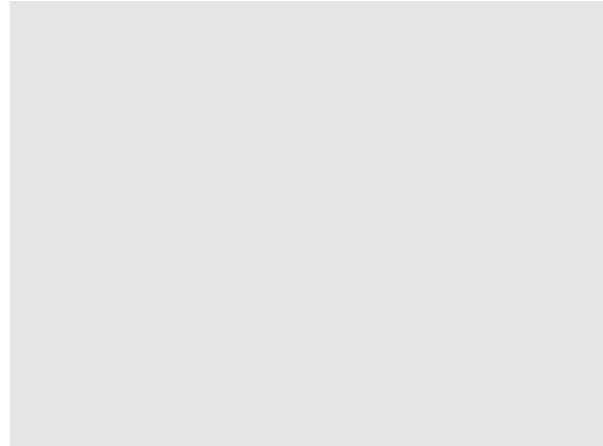
Viticulture was to be the main focus because it was the most logical place to begin. “You can’t make wine from anything but grapes that are grown in a vineyard,” Anderson says. Given Walla Walla’s growing reputation for its distinctive climate, soils, and vineyards, local winemakers “wanted to make sure that was the emphasis.”

(The program’s beloved founding viticulturist, Stan Clarke, led much of the program’s viticulture initiatives, including planting the first teaching vineyard (there are now three) until he passed away in 2007.)

Community buy-in was also important for hands-on internships and learning opportunities for students. Even today, a student with an interest in interning at Leonetti, where Josh McDaniels, winemaker at Doubleback and Bledsoe Wine Estates, interned, for example, has the opportunity because of the long history of partnership and collaboration between the college and the community.

Now, in the broader Walla Walla wine ecosystem, EV alums are regularly hired to work at other ventures, such as Doubleback, Abeja, and Canvasback, helmed by fellow graduates.

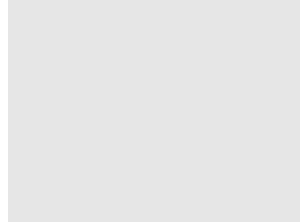
The idea to train and retain talent locally, to keep winemaking knowledge in the community and distribute its cumulative benefits throughout the local wine business, was a strategic step up from Walla Walla’s first wave of mostly self-taught commercial winemakers. These were a



The Institute for Enology and Viticulture at WWCC and the home of College Cellars.
Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin file

group who realized, as wine writer Karen MacNeil notes in “The Wine Bible,” “that the best teacher of all was trial and error.”

With such a framework to improve on and refine all those early years of hits and misses, the program has been “a huge success by any measure,” wrote Andy Perdue in 2016 for The Seattle Times. Program alums such as Elizabeth Bourcier (Bionic Wines), Chris Peterson (Avennia, Liminal, and Passing Time), Amy Alvarez-Wampfler (Abeja), Brian Rudin (Canvasback, Echolands), and McDaniels, just to name a few, have been making some of the state's top-awarded wines for decades.



The center's chemistry lab, where students study and analyze chemical components of wine.

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At the time it was founded, however, the two-year program that included teaching vineyards to supply grapes for the center's teaching winery, College Cellars, was the first of its kind in the state, and among just a few offered anywhere on the west coast.

Even Washington State University (WSU), which had started to offer classes in enology and viticulture throughout its campus network in the Columbia Basin, took notice.

“I do believe that the fact that the Walla Walla program was getting the traction that it was, that WSU noticed and was very, very aware of that; I believe the WSU program got stronger, and got funded better, because of what we were doing in Walla Walla,” says Rick Small, founding winemaker of Woodward Canyon. Small studied agriculture at WSU, and was part of the local braintrust Anderson tapped to develop the center.

Anderson, now 84, is officially retired from teaching and winemaking. He sold his shares in Walla Walla Vintners in 2017. Though a few times a month, with his wife, Myrna, the couple still come by to visit with Martin Fujishin, the Enology and Viticulture's program's new director, and students and faculty as they pass through the tasting room at College Cellars, where visitors can sample wine made by students.

Fujishin joined the college in June of 2024, himself a winemaker and one-time student of the program. He acknowledges the important role Anderson's once risky idea has played in the community, and how it helped elevate the profile of wine from Walla Walla and Washington state.

“It has been a massive driver for the industry in so many ways,” Fujishin says. “I feel like had it not been for the forward thinking of this program, I don't think the industry would be where it is today.”

In the next installment, former and current faculty, instructors, and program advisors share memories and stories about the program and its impact in Walla Walla.