

Lift off: The graduates pushing Washington wine to new heights

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
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Derrek Vipond (now winemaker at Walla Walla Vintners), Hector Rodriguez, and Brian Rudin destemming merlot at WWCC in September 2006.

Courtesy

-Stan Clarke, WWCC Enology and Viticulture Instructor

In this final installment of our three-part series about the history and impact of the Walla Walla Community College's Enology and Viticulture program, we turn to a few alumni who, since graduating, have continued to elevate the profile of wine from Washington state.

For part one, [click here](#). For part two, [click here](#).

MORE INFORMATION



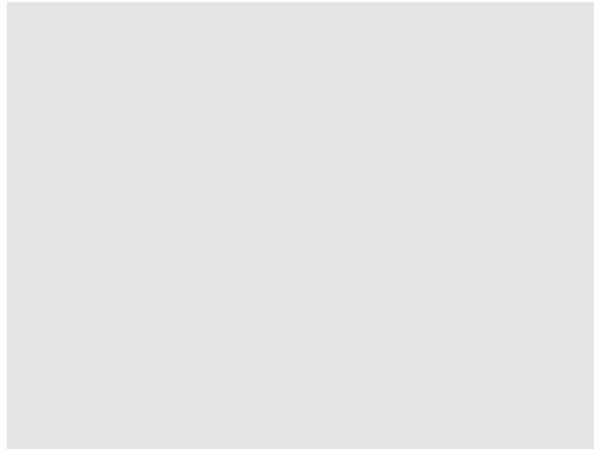
For all the time and planning that went into standing up the community college's wine center, and for all the talented instructors and faculty who led its classes over the years, the investment continues to pay off.

Look no further than a page on College Cellars' website with a list of graduates that reads more like a Washington wine hall of fame than a roster of humble community college grads, with some of the biggest names in Washington wine — Cayuse, The Walls, Pepper Bridge, Sparkman, Mark Ryan, Garrison Creek, Woodward Canyon, Abeja, Long Shadows, and Betz,

to name just a few — now home to alumni. Across the Columbia Valley appellation, and beyond, the EV program’s former students are keeping the Walla Walla winemaking legacy alive, and pushing the industry to new heights.

“So many of the most recognized winemakers and viticulturists in the state attended the WWCC E and V program,” says Alfredo “Freddy” Arredondo, class of 2006, winemaker at Cave B Estate Winery in Quincy. For nearly 19 years, Arredondo’s wines have collected numerous scores and awards, and in 2023, Arredondo was named one of four of the state’s top winemakers by the Seattle Wine Awards.

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



Ana Kaiser, Matt Steiner and Alfredo Arredondo pose for a photo to be used in "Vintage Walla Walla Valley."

Courtesy

Like his fellow alums, Arredondo says much of his success as a winemaker can be attributed to his time at the program, where he learned “that industry connections and working together are vital to a thriving wine industry.” Today, he continues to benefit from “the connections that I made with classmates from my program [who] were and still are a huge part of my career.”

Brian Rudin graduated a year after Arredondo in 2007, and went on to become founding winemaker for Napa-based Duckhorn’s Washington winery, Canvasback, where his one of his highest-scoring wines (2020 Canvasback Red Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon Longwinds Vineyard) received 97 points from Wine Advocate. He’s now winemaker and general manager at Walla Walla’s Echolands. Rudin says the institutional knowledge centralized at the college “is a huge boost for the entire industry.”

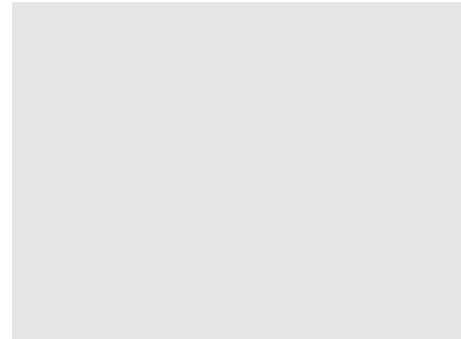
“Long after I graduated, I continued to rely on [instructors and faculty] just because they've seen so many scenarios and they have so much data at their fingertips that they record and present to their students.”

“The people that I met in my class, and the classes above and behind me, they're still some of my best friends and closest colleagues in the wine industry,” Rudin says. “Derek Vipond and I have been super close friends since we both started that program, and now he’s making wine next door to us at Walla Walla Vintners. We still bounce ideas off of each other now 20 years later.”

Sadie Drury graduated from the program in 2011. She is the general manager at North Slope Management, a farming operation that oversees a number of vineyards in the south part of the Walla Walla appellation. The area is known for its sustainable viticulture practices, as well as many heritage growing sites, such as Seven Hills, and some of the estate vineyards of Leonetti, Doubleback, and Caprio Cellars, among others.

Through Drury, it's easy to see how connections are formed, and information shared, through the center — she manages vineyards for Echolands, Valdemar, and L'Ecole 41, for example, each with its own head winemaker who graduated from the program.

“The most important thing I learned was the value of community. The E and V program unites the entire Walla Walla wine industry through education, outreach, activities, and alumni,” Drury says. “This creates a strong, thriving community of wineries and individuals who are helping each other out and celebrating each other’s success.”



Sadie Drury and Stan Clarke on November 7, 2007, just three weeks before Clarke passed away, working on trellising at the college's Viognier vineyard.

Courtesy of Sadie Drury

Working with Drury at Seven Hills vineyard, and after an internship with Figgins Family Wine Estates, it didn't take long for Devyani Gupta, class of 2018, to come to the attention of then-brand new Valdemar Estates. She joined the winery in 2019 as assistant winemaker and by 2021, she was head winemaker for the Walla Walla outpost of the fifth generation, Spanish-owned winery. Gupta's wines have already received multiple scores of 90 points or more; most recently, six of them were ranked 94 points or higher in the Decanter Wine Awards, a contest produced by the influential UK-based wine publication.

Gupta emphasizes the center's role as a gathering place to network and share information for everyone in the wine community.

“Having the ecosystem of sharing space with ETS [Laboratories, the center's on site chemistry lab] means that all these winemakers are coming through and dropping off samples,” Gupta says. “There are so many graduates working in the industry that between internships, continuing education opportunities, and this ‘get to know the new class’ event held every year, [where] all these winemakers and vineyard managers are in the room meeting new students...everybody's kind of interfacing in one hub.”

Winemaker since 2019, L'Ecole 41's Marcus Rafanelli has helped shepherd yet more recognition for the storied winery as one of the Top 100 of the Year by Wine & Spirits magazine. By 2023, the last time it was awarded, the winery had earned the distinction 17 times.

The 2008 grad says he also benefited from his close interactions at the college. Along with having met “some of my best friends and mentors during my two years at the program,” another advantage was that under the watchful eye of an instructor like Stan Clarke, he was

unable to avoid tasks he wasn't interested in at the time.



Marcus Rafanelli works two rows of Petit Verdot in the Stan Clarke teaching vineyard in late April 2007
Courtesy of Scott Haggerty

“I remember asking Stan Clarke in one of our first meetings if I could skip the viticulture portion,” Rafanelli says. “I don’t even think I finished the question before he said, ‘Absolutely not, the wine is made in the vineyard, not the cellar.’ Doing the work that year on my rows at the teaching vineyard gave me a deep appreciation for what goes into the growing of the wine, and how it is

directly related to the next step of the process which is finishing the wine in the cellar.”

“Stan Clarke rooted for me,” remembers Chris Peterson, one of the first graduates to complete the program in 2003. “He’s the reason why I got one of the best possible jobs out of school,” he says, referring to his role as assistant winemaker at DeLille Cellars in Woodinville, after Clarke put in a good word for him with founding winemaker Chris Upchurch.

22 years later, now winemaker at Avennia, Liminal, and Passing Time, with 90+ scores across brands and recognition as “Winery of the Year” (Passing Time, 2024, Northwest Wine Report) and “Winemaker of the Year” (2017, Seattle magazine), Peterson says the EV program was a “total game changer” in Washington state wine.

“There was this support for letting us become part of the community,” Peterson says.

Along the way, graduates of the Walla Walla Community College’s Enology and Viticulture program *became* the community, sharing expertise, time, and friendship that continues to characterize the spirit of winemaking in Washington state, and the exceptional wines that result so naturally from it.

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