Wine is a Food Group: Why Walla Walla Valley wine matters

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Jun 10, 2025 0

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Cabernet sauvignon growing in Block 10 of Bacchus vineyard, planted in 1972 in the White Bluffs AVA. Courtesy

Lately, I have been giving a lot of thought to why wine matters. So often these days when wine appears in the news, it's about a tasting room closing or winery downsizing, vineyards being sold, so-called research about wine's effect on your health, viticultural struggles in the face of climate change, shifting cultural attitudes, declining buying behavior, or some other ominously-worded headline about the subject.

As the industry turns into these headwinds, I've thought about Walla Walla's wine fortunes, and how (and why), decades ago, the valley hitched its wagon to the trade. It was a risk, but there was excitement, passion, and hope — for the tourism wine could attract here, the reputation it could grow, the local revitalization it promised, and last but not least, the community it could build.

According to the Walla Walla Valley Wine Alliance, in 2023 there were 168 active winery licenses in Walla Walla County and Milton-Freewater combined, businesses employing nearly 1000 workers and generating an estimated $248 million in sales. In 2022, the residual impacts of the local wine economy, from tourism-related spending to dollars being earned and spent locally among workers, the Alliance says, "supported a total regional economic impact of nearly 3,500 jobs, $165.2 million in associated labor income, and $588.9 million in business sales."

It's hard to argue that the wine business hasn't been good for Walla Walla, yet a growing number of voices — from pseudo health advocates to market prognosticators —s ay we would be better off without it. They say we could be healthier, get better sleep, and live longer. As consumers, we could save money buying wine and time shopping for it. Wine growers could avoid the inherent agricultural risks and the occasional heartache of an unpredictable vintage. Winery owners would never have to gamble their life savings on fickle consumer tastes or market volatility again.

To me, some of these considerations are actually quite real, while others seem to have come for wine for arbitrary or maybe even political reasons. Still, I have to think that wine itself transcends them all — inherently, it is more. For one, in an increasingly automated, over-engineered world, wine is an opportunity to recognize, celebrate, and support the things that make us human. After all, winemaking is a very human endeavor, with all the requisite toil and struggle that produces character, depth, and personality in a person as much as a wine.

In an increasingly fast-paced, task-oriented world, wine allows us to become lost in the moment, to focus on the present, and savor simple pleasures that are too often overlooked in the pursuit of what's next. It conjures conversations about life's big questions, linking us through time to a shared table, where over the ages, humanity has searched for meaning.

I thought it would be worthwhile to take these thoughts to a local in the wine biz bold enough to open a tasting room in today's business climate. This led me to Jonathan Edelman, co-founder of Foolhardy Vintners, the small production, Bordeaux variety-focused wine label that celebrated its grand opening in April.

Edelman, who met his business partner, winemaker Dan Sogg, when they were both liberal arts undergrads at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, took up the topic with gusto.

"Wine is such a social beverage. That is so essential to what it is. It's the only beverage that is so intrinsically linked to history, culture, place, family, friends, love, spirituality. I mean, Jesus did not turn water into whiskey, right?" Edelman says. "What beverage has that link to culture?"

Wine is also an art, Edelman says, another uniquely human form of expression.

"It's the search for perfection of a particular style that you'll never achieve. That journey, and sharing that journey with other people, is the joy of it," Edelman says.

Interestingly, wine is art at the Foolhardy tasting room — a woody, gnarled cabernet vine planted in 1972 at Bacchus vineyard near Pasco makes a striking wall sculpture.

The vine, Edelman says, is "the reason why we really came here." He explains it was through the relationships and associations he and Sogg formed in the Washington wine community over the years, among them former Wine Advocate and Washington wine writer Pierre Rovani, who became a close friend, and the team at Sagemoor, the agricultural group that first planted Bacchus vineyard, that drew them to Washington. (Though the tasting room is new, Sogg and Edelman launched Foolhardy in 2016, their wines available online and through distribution.)

Wine wasn't originally part of the plan for Edelman, who cooked his way through college, went to culinary school in Paris, and worked at Michelin-starred restaurants. "In the U.S., if I had had great mentors and had landed in better places, maybe I'd still be cooking, but it didn't happen." For Edelman, wine would become an enduring pursuit because of the community he found through it—a network of winemakers, growers, and other supporters he could lean on for partnership, career opportunities, and friendship.

"Serendipity plays a big part in life," Edelman says, wine being one of the many channels for its mysterious workings. After all, as his partner Sogg has said, "you've got to be a little foolhardy" to start a winery.

Thus has been the wine story in Walla Walla for decades — hard work, camaraderie, a little foolhardy luck, and perhaps most important, the support and buy-in from the community that helped transform a sleepy agricultural outpost to a world-renowned wine region.

As the business weathers the current downturn, that support remains critical, whether the winery is owned by an out-of-state company or your next-door neighbors. Any wine venture here in Walla Walla is an investment and a vote of confidence in the community, and the trickle-down benefits, from those who work at and staff the winery, to the residual businesses that offer cleaning, window, and lawn services, provide equipment repair, design collateral, cater events, and beyond, help us all thrive.

Stressful growing conditions can be beneficial to a grapevine, allowing the plant to develop strength and resiliency for the future, and I think about the Walla Walla wine industry similarly. With the steady, continued support of the community, our roots will grow even deeper. In time, a new vintage will grow, offering up assurance of why wine matters, and we can rest easy that we never lost sight of it.

Gwendolyn Elliott is a writer and editor in Walla Walla and was the first recipient of the Allen Shoup Memorial Fellowship for wine writers. Her website is gwendolynelliott.com.

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