

At Reali, wines honor an Italian heritage, guided by a renowned winemaker

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Oct 22, 2025

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Kristin and Ken Reali in their newly-opened tasting room.
Steve Lenz

Launching a wine business is never a sure bet.

But for Ken and Kristin Reali, co-owners of Reali, a winery opening on the north end this week, a readiness for risk runs in the family.

In 1907, Ken's great-grandfather, Utilio, immigrated to the United States from Tuscany. He settled in Chicago, where Ken grew up.

Like Utilio, Ken moved with his wife, Kristin, a speech language pathologist, and their three daughters, following opportunity — a result of his executive role in the medical device industry. Over the years, the family called Salt Lake City, Philadelphia, and Durham, North Carolina home.

Walla Walla came into view after years exploring wine regions across the nation and abroad, where the couple might someday plant their own vineyard, a dream that began after a memorable trip to Napa.

On a return visit to Walla Walla in 2021, the Realis looked at two parcels for sale that had been planted with wheat for 100 years. They put in an offer that



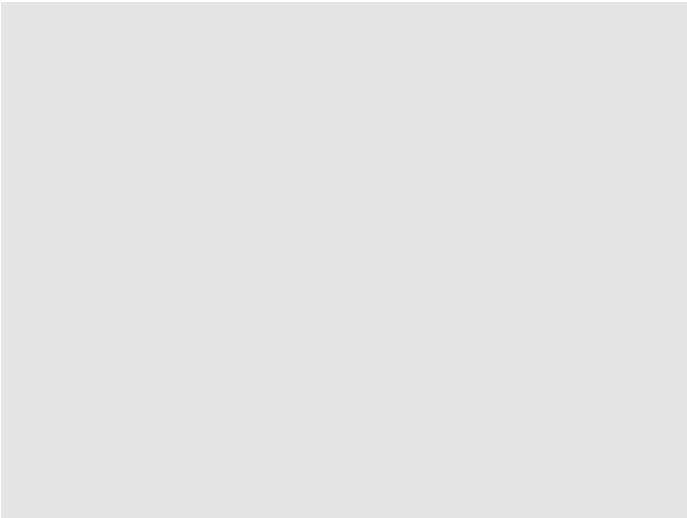
day.

“We loved the different aspects of the property. It wasn't just flat. And we envisioned how the different profiles and aspects of the land could really create and grow some beautiful vines that hopefully will develop into delicious wines,” Kristin said.

At the time, the wines were secondary. The Realis weren't thinking of settling in Walla Walla, but developing some of the 80 acre property into a vineyard to operate as owner-growers, and to build a small apartment where they could stay during visits to the area.

In 2023, Ken's role as a CEO ended. Suddenly, planting family roots, in addition to grapevines, became a viable option.

“We've always moved for Ken's job and it was always a decision made for us. So, we knew this was an opportunity to be able to make our own decision as to where we wanted to be,” Kristin said.



Winemaker Serge Laville at the Reali wine production facility, with the 2025 vintage in barrel, amphora, and concrete.

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Around the same time, the Realis were introduced to winemaker Serge Laville. Originally from the old world himself, Laville moved to Walla Walla from France in 2000. Now a standard-bearer of Walla Walla wine, for 20 years, Laville was winemaker at Spring Valley, where he led the brand to numerous awards and achievements, including rankings on lists such as the Wine Spectator Top 100.

Laville was familiar working with grapes grown on former wheatfields, a big part of the Spring Valley story.

“It's a little lower in elevation, but this is the same soil type,” Laville said.

The Realis had met their maker.

“We could just have the vineyard and sell the grapes, but then we found this winemaker we really like. Why don't we just do the whole thing?” Kristin said.

With site analysis from geologist and terroir expert, Kevin Pogue, planting began in 2023 on 15.5 acres ranging from 950 to 1100 feet. Eight varieties were planted, including three Italian ones: vermentino, barbera, and sangiovese, along with cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, malbec, chardonnay, and sauvignon blanc.

Given the young age of the vines, Realis' inaugural wines, being released this fall, are made from grapes sourced throughout the Columbia Valley. They include a rosé of cabernet franc, sauvignon blanc, grenache, and cabernet sauvignon, all made in

Kristin and Ken Reali with guests on the patio at Reali.

Steve Lenz

Laville's preferred minimalist style.

From left: Winemaker Serge Laville, and Reali co-owners Kristin and Ken Reali, at the vineyard terrace in the Reali estate vineyard.

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“I am conducting grape fermentation naturally as often as possible, leaving native yeast doing the job. For certain varietals or vineyards, I limit myself to only two additives, dry yeast and organic nutrients,” Laville said, noting for a boutique winery such as Reali, whose first vintage yielded approximately 750 cases, there is more time to adjust winemaking methods according to natural rhythms, and the condition of the fruit.

“I respect the grapes and terroir, taking my time and leaving the wine to evolve with minimum intervention and maximum connection. Our wines are made in a small cellar, not a factory,” he said.

A pole barn built in 2022, originally intended to house vineyard equipment, was transformed into an elegant tasting room. Polished concrete floors, wood accents — including a passthrough “wine window” like those of Florence — and cozy features like a brick-lined archway add a warm Tuscan feel. Throughout, other motifs nod to Ken’s Italian roots.

The iconic cypress trees of Tuscany are featured on graphic wallpaper in one of two bathrooms. In the other, empty chianti bottles encased in straw line a shelf — a touch that speaks to Ken’s childhood.

“I have fond memories of my grandparents in particular, who are both great cooks. One was Italian, and one was Polish, and I remember them arguing in the kitchen about how to cook different things, but they would make their pasta from scratch. My grandfather was very proud of Tuscany. He had the Tuscan wine bottles, the fiasco, lying in the dining room,” Ken said.

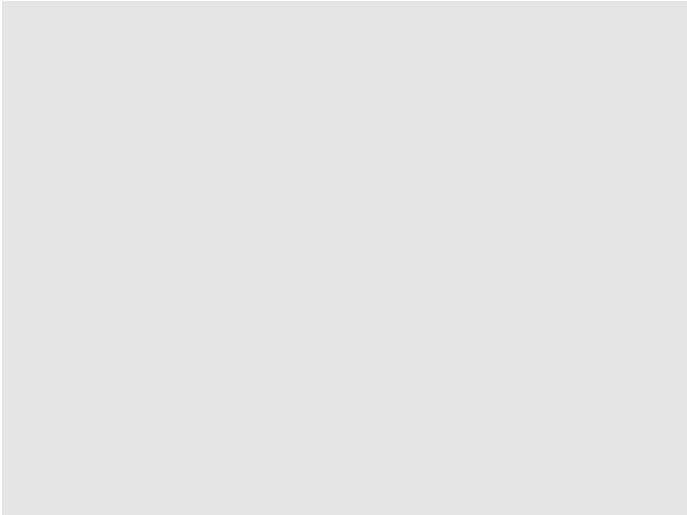
More bespoke elements, from the olive oil — made by Ken’s cousin in Italy — served with small bites paired with the wines, to the five custom-made copper circles hovering above the Reali name in a hallway, speak to an abiding family legacy.

The circles are part of the centuries-old Reali family crest, and to the Realis, signify Ken, Kristin, and their three (now grown) daughters. They also have another meaning.

“When my great-grandfather moved to the United States, he worked in a copper mine. It’s an honor to him. I respect people that take a chance and come to a new country to make a new life,” said Ken, who sees similar traits in Reali’s founding winemaker, Laville. “I think it takes a lot of fortitude and resiliency.”

Even in an uncertain business, the Realis and Laville are all in.

“Wine’s been around for thousands of years,” Ken said. “I think there’s always a place for good wine.”



The Reali tasting room is situated on Walla Walla’s north end, just above Eritage Resort.
Steve Lenz

More Information

Reali opens to the public Thursday, October 23, with a grand opening planned throughout the weekend. For details, visit realifamilyvineyard.com