

Groundbreaker: Celebrating 25 Years of Washington Wine



by Leslie Kelly

Mike Januik's been called "the king of Merlot", but that's not a crown he's much interested in wearing.

"I don't want to be the king of anything," said the soft-spoken native of California who has been making wine in Washington State since 1984. "As much as I love making wine and drinking wine, there are more important things in life. Like spending time with family, traveling and hiking on the Olympic Peninsula."

Not that he's crowing, but Januik has much to be proud of over the course of his long career, which began with a chance meeting on the campus at University of California-Davis, where he got his masters in enology and viticulture.

"The owner of Stewart Vineyards, George Stewart, had put an ad up on a bulletin board that I happened to see," he said. "We talked and as we walked to his car, he said: 'You seem like an OK guy. How would you like a job?' At that time, I had never even worked at a winery."

During those first few harvests at the now-defunct winery in Yakima, Januik got his fill of on the job training: "I was always on the phone to my friends in California,

MIKE JANUIK, Januik and Novelty Hill Wineries

asking what to do next."

That wasn't nearly as stressful, though, as when he took a job at Languth and made big leap in scale. "I had been crushing 80 to 100 tons at Stewart and suddenly, I was working with 5,000 tons. There were a lot more pieces of the puzzle to keep track of," he said.

His work there caught the attention of Chateau Ste. Michelle's then CEO Allen Shoup, who eventually hired him to oversee the production of both the red and white wines.

"They were determined to improve the quality of wine and they had the resources to do it. When I got there, we were buying more French oak barrels than any other winery in the country, something like 7,000 oak barrels a year. That took a real commitment on Chateau Ste. Michelle's part," Januik said.

He also had the luxury of putting together a crackerjack team. "I loved working with Charlie Hoppes and Erik Olsen," he said.

Januik is also credited with expanding the vineyard-designated wine program, making the winery's first single vineyard red, the 1991 Indian Wells Vineyard Merlot.

He spent nearly 10 years at Ste. Michelle before setting out on his own, a decision that wasn't easy.

"In many ways, working at Ste. Michelle was a dream job, but I wanted to have other experiences in my career. I remember talking with my wife, Carolyn, about it, wondering whether it was the right thing to do. She said when we met, she never thought I'd have a job as long as I had. She didn't see what the big deal was," Januik said, smiling.

Her advice was sound.

His wines have garnered a trophy case worth of awards. And the state-of-the-art winery bearing his name – as well as Novelty Hill – became a popular destination as soon as it opened in 2007 in then-still-sleepy Woodinville. Its sleek, stylish design regularly receives raves, as does the brick oven pizza served there on weekends. "It's a nice place to hang out," Januik said.

He especially enjoys the camaraderie around the blending table and loves cooking for his tight-knit crew, which often includes his sons, Donny and Andrew. "I made corn tortillas the other day, so we had quesadillas for breakfast," said Januik, who also bakes bread and makes a point each summer to pick up peaches from an orchard near Stillwater Creek, Novelty Hill's estate vineyards, so he can fill the family freezer with his famous peach pies.

Over the years, he's made small adjustments in his approach to winemaking. At Stillwater Creek, he directed innovative planting of various clonal selections. Januik backed off higher levels of acidity found in his wines from the 1980s and early '90s, firmly believing that a wine should taste as supple and elegant when it's first released as it does after time in the cellar: "I once heard the winemaker at Chateau Margaux say that and it made a big impression."

And even though he's got hundreds of 90+ ratings, he's never been about chasing trends or scores.

"If you try to follow trends, you're going to end up chasing your tail," he said. "It's important to figure out what style of wine you want to make and commit to it."