

Wine Spectator



Januik, Quietly a Star

By Harvey Steiman

Posted: 05:25 AM ET, May 13, 2009

His wines are similarly solid. He never goes for extremes, always for balance and polish. The ones he makes under his own name have a bit more depth and character than those he makes, in the same facility, for Novelty Hill, whose owner built the winery. Januik and Novelty Hill don't share the same sources, however. The Novelty Hill wines are built around Stillwater Creek Vineyard in Wahluke Slope. Januik's come from independent vineyards around the state, primarily Red Mountain, Horse Heaven Hills and Walla Walla.

When Mike Januik was running the winemaking show at Chateau Ste. Michelle in the 1990s, his wines were constantly among the leaders in a Washington state wine scene that was just beginning to achieve its potential. When he started his own winery in 1999, the wines were good, but without the resources he had at Ste. Michelle it took a while for them to gain traction.

While some of the early vintages missed badly, recent ones have shown great consistency. And since moving into a state-of-the-art, modern winery in 2007, the quality has taken a big jump. On a recent visit, Januik shared with me a complete vertical of his Januik Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, from 1999 to 2006. The results are instructive.

Januik has consistently struck me as one of the most low-key guys in the wine industry. The people who work for him might tell a different story, because he is exacting about what he wants to do with the wines, but you might never peg him as a star when you meet him. His quiet, matter-of-fact persona makes him look like part of the crowd instead of seeming above it.

The Columbia Valley Cabernet uses grapes from Red Mountain and Horse Heaven Hills. If that sounds familiar to Washington insiders, it's because it's the same regional mix as Quilceda Creek's, which sells for more than \$100 on release. Januik's version, at \$30, is less dramatic but more polished. Dollar for dollar, it holds its own.

The 2005 vintage, No. 61 on the 2008 *Wine Spectator* Top 100, jumped out as a particular favorite again. Generous, with peppery and savory overtones to the currant and berry fruit, it's focused and elegant. I rated it 93 blind before, and in this tasting, which was non-blind, 93 points again.

One surprise for me is how well the 2003 has developed. It was a very ripe vintage, which may have added some extra stuff to Januik's laid-back style. Ripe, firm and brimming with currant, blackberry and plum flavors, it kept getting more generous with each plush sip. 93 points this time, non-blind.

I had never tasted the first vintage, 1999, before. Januik did not start submitting wines until they were more widely available,

so the first record I have is of 2001. The '99, it turns out, went all brett-y within a year, and it has a real cow-pasture reek today. What happened? "Damned if I know," Januik shrugged. "It tested clean in the lab before we bottled it, but within six months it was like that."

The '01 showed a similar underlying character but not anywhere near the level. Crisp tannins are not like the later wines, but the bright, youthful fruit marks this as a wine that's still coming into its own. 90 points, non-blind. The 2000 was better—crisp and focused, refined, with a lovely beam of plum and currant fruit, finishing supple and sweet. I can see drinking either one through 2015. 92 points, non-blind.

The '02, for a cooler vintage, shows crisp structure, lively currant and plum flavors, finishing with harmony. You can see the style coming together. 91 points, non-blind.

The '04 is tighter, with broad tannins that feel plush and soft under the generous fruit. 92 points, non-blind. And the '06, just released, stood up well to the '05, with the same peppery overtones and sense of refinement. Non-blind, I rated it 93 points. I'll be tasting it blind soon.

Looking back later on my published scores for the older wines, it's clear that Januik's, like most Washington wines, remain fresh and inviting for years. They don't fade quickly, probably due to Washington's naturally vibrant acidity. More important, these Cabernets do improve in the bottle. For a wine that sells for \$30, that's a plus.