



## The Chemistry of Wine and Love

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Chemistry has been an all-important driver of Daniel Wampfler's career and life—from making beer with his dad in Midland, Michigan, to pursuing B.S. ('01) and M.S. ('03) degrees at Michigan State University, to recognition as a leading winemaker in Washington state, second-largest wine producer in the U.S.



Wampfler, co-winemaker and co-general manager at Abeja, a landmark Walla Walla farmstead exquisitely refashioned as a winery and inn, started out working for the Dow Chemical Company as a summer co-op student and thought he might follow that path. "But my parents said, 'do what you love,'" he recalled. And a nascent fondness for fermentation sciences, ignited by that teenage home-brewing experience, grew. He learned basics of fruit distillation from Prof. Kris Berglund, who taught food engineering at MSU. Soon enough Prof. G. Stanley Howell—remembered fondly for his trademark white hair and beard and importantly for establishing a leading viticulture and enology program, with Spartan Cellars and vineyards on- and off-campus—became his major professor. While other students gravitated toward a viticultural concentration (soils, clonal selection of grape varieties, vineyard cultivation and all that), Wampfler was among the very first MSU students to focus his studies on enology (the science of wine and winemaking). "I really got to create my own program," the would-be chemist remembered.

### In the Real World

"Wine and winemaking, food too, can be enjoyed with all your senses—yes, you can hear sparkling-wine bubbles." It ticked all the boxes, including shedding the signature white lab coat of brewery chemists before development of today's robust craft-beer industry. He started out as a cellar rat—moving and cleaning barrels, checking fermentation levels among myriad unglamorous but fundamental chores—at the venerable Stone Hill Winery in Herman, Missouri. "Jon Held, an owner, was an early mentor." Wampfler's skills and instincts developed, but he wanted to move on "... to be part of a larger wine community. Washington was well-established, already on the world stage. And with a sky's-the-limit attitude." Ste. Michelle Wine Estates (then Stimson Lane Vineyards & Estates), by far the state's largest producer which has given many top winemakers a start, had an opening for a red-wine research winemaker.

Shortly he shifted to production for red, white and sparkling wines at Columbia Crest, one of Ste. Michelle's most visible brands, falling more and more in love with wine. And with another Columbia Crest winemaker, Amy Alvarez. By the time they married, both had solid industry experience and credentials... just about everything.

**But There Was More—Hollywood and Heaven**

Amy Alvarez-Wampfler became winemaker and general manager at Sinclair Estate Vineyards. Her husband took on a similar role at Dunham Cellars—as well as some consulting gigs. He helped two retired Air Force pilots get their winery, Aluvé Winery, off the ground. And continues to make vineyard and barrel choices side-by-side with the “down-to-earth” actor Kyle MacLachan for his boutique brand Pursued By Bear. (Stayed tuned: Post-Covid the two plan to resume winemaker-dinner appearances in select U.S. locations.)



Dan Wampfler shares winemaking duties at Abeja with his wife Amy Alvarez-Wampfler.

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“I am proudest of being accepted into someone else’s winery, given the reins and then exceeding [their] expectations,” Wampfler said. “And it has happened more than once.” First, at Dunham, where he tripled the output in eight years. Then at Abeja—which came with a bonus. When ownership first approached him with an offer, he asked for the one thing he and Amy felt missing: “We wanted to stand together and pour wine. I wanted to create something with my best friend.” In the end, the answer was, yes, please. “And now we are co-winemakers, co-general managers, co-everything at Abeja.” They oversee 65 estate acres, adjusting to the seasonal surprises of Mother Nature, and produce critically praised cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah, chardonnay, viognier and more; plus setting highest guest-experience standards for those staying in the farmhouse or cottages on the property.



An illustrated map of the Abeja property.

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"It's most fun to see visitors light up when they taste and connect with the wines we have made," Wampfler said, adding that many are surprised to discover that winemaking is actually a "...blue-collar job with snobbish appeal." At Abeja the gritty workaday tasks that go into elevating wine to fine status recently got a little added glitz. Wampfler and Alvarez-Wampfler led design and construction of a new winery facility. "We are in heaven. Industry [colleagues are] speechless with jealousy. All production, finally, is under one roof, and things get done when they need to get done. Efficiency leads to quality improvement. It's safer—no hoses and cords all over the floor or tricky ladders to climb." The biggest "wow factor?" A sensory lab, sealing out all distractions. What else for a one-time chemist who fell in love with wine for its all-around sensual appeal.

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