

WALLA WALLA

# Union-Bulletin

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## Abeja Winery & Inn recognized for 'doing things the right way'

Hannah McIntyre Walla Walla Union-Bulletin 3 hrs ago 0



Winemakers Daniel Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler stand in the small barn at Abeja Winery & Inn on Tuesday, April 25. The winery was recently honored as the [2023 Great Northwest Wine Washington Winery of the Year](#).

Greg Lehman, [Walla Walla Union-Bulletin](#)

The swinging gates of Abeja Winery & Inn lead to a tranquil 38-acre vineyard in Walla Walla's countryside.

The property, originally a wheat farmstead established in the early 1920s, features buildings from the past that have been modernized for the present.

A historic farmhouse and refurbished farm cottages dot the property all while being surrounded by estate vineyards. It's hard to believe the peaceful escape from the buzz of the city is only a few minutes from downtown Walla Walla.

Ben and Ginger Harrison, founders of Abeja Winery & Inn, stumbled upon the property before Walla Walla's wine industry had taken off. In 2018, the Harrisons sold the majority interest in the Inn at Abeja and the winery to two investment groups.

Since its founding days, the winery has become well-known, especially after receiving the [Great Northwest Wine 2023 Washington Winery of the Year](#).

The award holds a deeper significance for Daniel Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, who are winemakers, than a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay or Merlot.

It's a delicate balance of art and science.

"It's fantastically humbling because it's not just one year's worth of efforts, it's a long-term span of doing things the right way," Wampfler said.

"We definitely do our best all the time," Alvarez-Wampfler added. "Whether its hospitality, wine or just building the team, we've always done our best to our ability."

Although Walla Walla Valley has not always been known for its wine, Alvarez-Wampfler said the industry in the area has flourished over time, and the Abeja team has evolved with it, adding new departments such as a culinary and a vineyard crew.

"It's been great," Alvarez-Wampfler said. "We love to see the growth, especially the growth for Abeja."

The winemakers said it's the employees at Abeja that make it stand out among [the 135 wineries located in the Walla Walla Valley AVA](#), or American Viticulture Area.

"We have such an amazing team that is full of passionate, professional forward-thinking individuals," Wampfler said. "Regardless of the beauty of the inn, the deliciousness of the dinners, or the yumminess of the wine, our people really do set us apart."

Over the course of their seven-year tenure with Abeja, the winemaking team has taken on various roles, including that of general manager, to ensure seamless operations. "Typically, when we're slow as winemakers, we're busy as general managers," he said.

In addition to a growing team in 2020, a shiny new production facility cropped up on the Abeja property to streamline the winemaking process. The original winemaking space, known as the "Big Barn", was built in the early 1900s and later converted into a winery in 2004. It was small for the number of vintages Abeja was producing.

Alvarez-Wampfler said the echoing space, which is now equipped with state-of-the-art features, not only increases the efficiency of the winemaking but makes it safer as well.

A disco ball hangs in a corner of the new production facility. "It's to remind ourselves to not take ourselves so seriously because we make wine for a living," Wampfler joked.

## Welcoming vineyard

Despite their imposing appearance, the main entrance gates of Abeja Winery & Inn are, in fact, open to all visitors.

Wampfler said Abeja has been combatting the perception that the winery and inn are closed to the general public. While bookings are required for tastings and dining, everyone is welcome to partake in the experience, not just wine club members.

"We're really lucky in the sense that demand is bigger than supply," he said. "Things aren't worth doing if they are not worth sharing, and we really want to share, particularly with the community."

Alvarez-Wampfler said that while the majority of Abeja's customers are from the Pacific Northwest, the winery has also attracted visitors from as far as the East Coast and Texas, eager to sample the region's wines. Before the pandemic, international travelers also frequented the establishment, a trend the winery hopes to resume.

Thanks to its rural location and self-contained lodging options, the winery was able to navigate the pandemic with a measure of success.

"It wasn't like you were going to a hotel where you had to take the elevator and walk through a hall to get to your room," Alvarez-Wampfler said. "Here, we're out in the open. You could show up and not see another person for a whole weekend because you have 38 acres to meander around."

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the winery's direct-to-consumer wine sales remained stable.

Alvarez-Wampfler noted the most important outcome was the safety of the team, which was fortunately maintained throughout the pandemic.

## Rooted in sustainability

The name "Abeja" — pronounced "ah-BEY-ha" — is the Spanish word for "bee," a reflection of the winery's commitment to sustainability because honeybees are essential to the production of healthy wine grapes. The surface of every cork and bottle is adorned with the image of a delicate honeybee.

Wampfler explained the bee serves as a constant reminder of the winery's values of sustainability and environmentalism. The couple's ultimate aim is to continuously surprise and delight their guests with the unique taste of Walla Walla Valley wines.

As Wampfler puts it, winemaking teaches us the invaluable lesson that "the job is never finished until the wine is bottled," and that there is always room for improvement at every stage of the process.

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### Regional Winery Award selection

Recipients of the Regional Great Northwest Winery Awards program are chosen through a rigorous selection process that involves blind tastings, visits, accolades and other relevant factors. To be eligible for the Winery of the Year award, a winery must have produced at least five vintages.