

Winemaker carves out new opportunity with Lodmell Cellars

A French import

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Photo: Matt Hagen

Virginie Bourgue Lodmell and Andrew Lodmell plan to open the third winery at the Port of Walla Walla incubator program in April.

At first blush, Virginie Bourgue Lodmell's journey from a French vineyard to a Walla Walla winery may seem odd, but it actually makes sense.

Raised amid grapevines on a farm in France's Provence region, Bourgue moved to Washington in 2002 to intern for Chateau Ste. Michelle at its Canoe Ridge facility in Paterson. She went on to become winemaker at Walla Walla's Bergevin Lane Vineyards.

Twenty years ago, this progression might have left people scratching their heads, but it now reflects Ste. Michelle's emergence as a training ground for top winemakers, as well as the growing opportunities for those winemakers to carve out a local living.

"More and more people are aware that Washington is making good wines, and Walla Walla is becoming a destination for many winemakers," Bourgue Lodmell said.

Now that Bourgue Lodmell has begun mastering her craft, she and her husband, grape grower Andrew Lodmell, are launching a new winery as part of the Port of Walla Walla's winery incubator project.

Cramming in winery work around their day jobs -- Bourgue Lodmell consults with wineries while Lodmell works the vineyard -- the pair's business plan revolves around keeping Lodmell Cellars small.

"We are not intending to grow above 1,000 cases, but we are not going to be cheap," Bourgue Lodmell said of her wines, which will include chardonnay and Syrah, and will command prices of between \$25 and \$45 a bottle.

The wines will be sourced from fruit grown on the couple's vineyard and from fruit purchased from other, well-known Washington vineyards. Bourgue Lodmell will move into her new incubator space

in April. She said that by designing the space to fit wineries' needs, the port made it much easier for her to get up and running.

"You don't have to do any remodeling -- it's kind of like turning the key in a new car," she said.

Her new venture is only one of many reasons Bourgue Lodmell is happy to have landed in what many of her countrymen still consider an unlikely destination.

"I love the hills here, and that you can be a part of a farming community," she said. "It's a place where you can have a very nice lifestyle."

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