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Port of Walla Walla winery incubator toasts new maker

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By Pratik Joshi, Herald staff writer

WALLA WALLA -- Virginie Bourgue Lodmell and her husband Andrew Lodmell soon will be joining the winemaking business.

For Bourgue Lodmell, it's a dream come true, thanks to the Port of Walla Walla.

Lodmell Cellars is the newest tenant at the port's \$1.1 million winery incubator facility that went up last fall at the Walla Walla Regional Industrial Park.

The facility is ideal for fledgling wineries, say the port's three tenants.

The port developed the program to help motivate graduates of Walla Walla Community College's enology and viticulture program start up wineries, said Jim Kuntz, the port's executive director.

By providing rental space at \$1,100 a month, the port can help retain budding entrepreneurs and promote economic development in the area, Kuntz said.

The buildings are leased for a period of six years and each year the rent goes up. The idea is to encourage winemakers to move out of the facility as they grow bigger and make way for others needing support, Kuntz said.

The port plans two more similar buildings in the future, he said.

"The wine incubator program came at the right time for us," said Bourgue Lodmell, who plans to take care of winemaking and day-to-day management of Lodmell Cellars.

Each of the three incubators is about 1,600 square feet and is designed for winemakers, said Jennifer Skoglund, the port's assistant airport manager. They provide climate-controlled work and storage areas with high ceilings and floor drains. An outdoor crush pad also is part of the facility.

Bourgue Lodmell plans to invest more than \$50,000 in equipment to make small batches of wine. The couple's business plan focuses on quality over quantity.

Bourgue Lodmell will make rosé this summer, and an array of reds, including merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah and whites such as sauvignon blanc and chardonnay next year. She will sell her wines for \$20 to \$50 a bottle.

Her philosophy of winemaking is to capture the best attributes of the grape to "express the vineyard in the wine," said Bourgue Lodmell, who grew up in a grape-growing family in the Provence region in France and has a master's degree in winemaking. She worked for three years at Bergevin Lane Vineyards in Walla Walla and started her own viticulture and winemaking consultant business in 2006.

She and her husband had some of their 2005-06 grapes crushed and stored in barrels as they looked around for a place to make and sell wine. Her husband grows grapes on his family's 15 acres in Prescott.

She plans to use grapes from the Lodmell vineyards and other area growers. Her goal is to produce 1,000 cases of premium wines annually and earn a reputation in the state.

Lodmell Cellars joins Devin Stinger and his wife Debra, who started Adamant Cellars after moving into the port's wine incubator facility in October -- about the same time three recent graduates from the college's program set up Trio Vintners in one of the incubator buildings.

The incubator helped the winery to focus on wines and the vineyard instead of worrying about logistics, said Denise Slattery, one of the Trio partners.

A self-taught winemaker from Portland, Devin Stinger gave up his job as an aerospace engineer and invested \$160,000 to produce syrah and red blends. He said he wants to make about 1,000 cases of Cotes-du-Rhone-style and Bordeaux-style wines and sell them for \$25 to \$35 a bottle.

His first batch of ros and whites, which are marginally cheaper in price, are available for tasting, he said.

Having other winemakers as neighbors is a plus, allowing them to share ideas and tips, said Slattery and Stinger. But that doesn't mean they end up making similar wines, Slattery said.

Slattery and her partners, Steve Michener and Tim Boushey, prefer moderate use of new oak barrels to let wine drinkers taste the fruit. They also are promoting lesser known varieties of grapes like sangiovese and mourvedre to make a different product. Trio's offering 2006 riesling and 2006 rose, a blend of sangiovese and mourvedre, Slattery said.

That's a smart move, said Stan Clarke, associate director of Institute for Enology and Viticulture. By offering a unique product, emerging winemakers can garner some attention, he said, adding that marketing is the key to success.

"(Winemaking) is a very competitive industry," he said.

Generally, Clarke doesn't advise his graduating students to plunge into the winemaking business. He always tells them "to get well-heeled in science and business first." Two-thirds of his two dozen students every year end up staying in Walla Walla to work in vineyards.

But he is confident about the Trio group's success, citing their mix of talent. Trio's wines this year cost anywhere from \$12 to \$24, Slattery said.

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