THE BETZ FACTOR: This pioneering Washington vintner knows his business inside and out

By Bruce Schoenfeld  From Wine Spectator magazine, July 31, 2006 issue

In the kitchen of his house in suburban Woodinville, just outside Seattle, winemaker Bob Betz presses out pizza dough on a marble counter. He adds San Marzano tomatoes, olives and tissue-thin slices of prosciutto. Then he lifts his creation into a restaurant-quality wood-burning oven, blazing away at more than 800° F, that has been installed in the far wall.

Twenty-five years earlier, while he was visiting Tuscan wineries with his wife, Cathy, he had seen an oven like it and had known that he'd eventually own one. "I didn't want to just eat the pizza made from that oven, I wanted to be the one to cook it," says Betz, 58. "I've never wanted to be a spectator. I've always had to get to the bottom of things. I've always had to say, 'I can do that.'"

Since 1973, when he stood amid the vines of Burgundy's Clos de Bèze and told Cathy, "At some point in my life, one of my own wines will be called Clos de Betz," he has felt the same way about winemaking. But before he put his name on a bottle, Betz spent two decades working for Washington wine giant Stimson Lane, known since 2004 as Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, eventually rising to the nebulous position of vice president of enology research and education.

It was one of the great amorphous jobs in the world of wine. He wasn't a marketer, but he traveled as many as 125,000 miles a year on behalf of the company's wines, conducting tastings, comparing Chateau Ste. Michelle to Haut-Brion and other iconic wines, and otherwise "defending the brand," as he describes it.

He wasn't actually making the wines, but as an enological researcher he came to understand as much as the winemakers did about the technical aspects of the craft. He wasn't a businessman, but he helped engineer successful joint ventures with Italy's Piero Antinori (Col Solare) and Germany's Ernst Loosen (Eroica). "Bob began working with tour guides, then his job evolved into public relations, [then it] evolved into education, and then he ended up working more closely with winemakers," says Ted Baseler, who has worked at Stimson Lane since 1984 and been its CEO since 2001. "We never really knew what to call it, but I always reminded him that he had the best job in the company. And he agreed."

Along the way, in 1998, Betz's relentless curiosity about all things wine-related led him to study for and take the Master of Wine examination, becoming one of the few Americans to pass the arduous test and lifting his tasting credentials to a level of academic impeccability. He also made annual pilgrimages to Europe and beyond, venturing to other New World wine regions. Few Americans were regularly trying so many of the world's best bottlings.

But he never lost sight of his ambition to make his own wine. Now Clos de Betz is one of five wines produced by his Betz Family Vineyards, founded as a side project nine years ago and upgraded into a full-time endeavor when Betz left Stimson Lane in 2003. He currently makes 2,500 cases from red Bordeaux and Rhône varieties each year. Two of the wines, the Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley Père de Famille 2001 and the Syrah Red Mountain La Côte Rousse 2002, have scored 94 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. Other of his wines have followed close behind.

All of them reflect the balance, intensity and intellectual rigor of a winemaking process informed by the knowledge of what the best wines from around the world taste like—and why they taste the way they do. "He knows the world of wine, he's got a great palate and he's making wine with personality, character and soul,"
says Christophe Baron of Walla Walla's Cayuse Vineyards. "Bob's wines are basically what Washington is supposed to be all about."

In many ways, the trajectory of Betz's career reflects that of the Washington wine industry. When he first became passionate about wine in the early 1970s, there were only about a dozen wineries, compared with almost 400 today. Large commercial vineyard plantings in the Columbia River Basin had started just a decade earlier. Legendary California enologist André Tchelistcheff was consulting at Chateau Ste. Michelle.

After graduating from the University of Washington with thoughts of medical school, Betz traveled to Europe, "going to Yquem and Latour and Marchesi di Barolo at a time when not too many people were making those kinds of visits." Determined to change career paths when he returned, the only job he could envision in wine was as the owner of a shop specializing in the great producers he'd visited.

Betz could have joined the rush to Napa, where modern American wine was beginning to assert itself. But Washington was home, so he accepted a job in a local store and started tasting the Rieslings and other white wines that the state's best producers were making. He thought he could distinguish in these wines certain elements reminiscent of the wines he'd been drinking across Europe. More than any single flavor profile, he sensed, in bottle after bottle, an inherent seriousness. It convinced him that Washington had the potential to make wines of international renown. "For whatever reason, I just saw something on a very rudimentary basis," he says. "I just felt, 'Something is going on here.'"

He started at Stimson Lane in January 1976. In the years that followed, the company's size and economic heft became a driving force in introducing American wine drinkers to quality Washington wine. Beyond that, Stimson Lane had the vision to experiment with grape clones, yeasts, vineyard management and other aspects of wine production, earmarking an estimated $30 million over the past three decades toward research and development. Which clones of Syrah worked best in the Columbia Valley? Which trellis system led to optimal yields? Betz and other Stimson Lane researchers did the testing, and Washington winemakers benefited as a whole. "It provided the muscle for the development of the industry," Betz says.

The company's efforts to raise the level of winemaking in the state contributed to the evolution of a culture in which a boutique winery could flourish. That has enabled Betz and others to set up shop with the confidence that their best wines can command retail prices across the country of $30, $40 and more. "It's the change in the market, the change in the attitude of consumers, the improvement of the vineyards and winemaking technology," Betz says. "If I had tried to go off and do this in, say, 1990, I don't think I would have been able to. The market wouldn't have supported it."

"There were people attempting that in the early '90s, and they weren't getting anywhere," says Baseler. "When the industry really turned here was the late '90s."

In the three years since Betz left Stimson Lane to concentrate his energy on Betz Family Vineyards, which also employs his wife and his daughter Carmen (a second daughter, Carla, is a nascent actress and punk-rock musician in Los Angeles), the project has grown dramatically. A new $1.3 million, 6,000-square-foot facility, paid for entirely from his retirement savings and opened late last year, now sits just down the hill from his house.

There's nothing amorphous about his current position. "I punch down and do the pump-overs and the racking, and I love it," he says. "I love every minute of the process, from walking in the vineyard to the manual labor, getting out of a tie and cleaning tanks— all of it."

Like many Washington wineries, Betz Family is located more than 200 miles from the vineyards it sources, which lie on the far side of the Cascade Mountains. Betz Family owns no vineyards; yet, because Betz has
been tramping through Washington's wine regions for 30 years, inspecting soils and visiting grapegrowers, he has been able to contract specific blocks and even rows of vines from some of the state's best sites.

During each of Betz's three or four annual visits to Ciel du Cheval Vineyard on Red Mountain in Yakima Valley, he and owner Jim Holmes will invariably end up walking the vineyard, absorbed in conversation about a new trellis technique or canopy-management strategy that someone is using somewhere else in the world. "Whenever he comes out here," Holmes says, "I learn things. He has a tremendous knowledge of all aspects of winemaking around the world, as well as our little corner of Washington, and you can taste that in his wines."

Betz's wines—a Cabernet Sauvignon, a Merlot-based blend, two Syrahs and a Grenache-based blend—have enough stuffing to improve with a few years of bottle age, but also have the capacity to be enjoyed almost immediately after release. "It's all about making wines that give pleasure," Betz says, though to him, the unexamined wine isn't worth drinking. "To me, the pleasure comes from understanding the cause-and-effect relationship, whether in history or wine or anything else," he says. "I want to know why a wine is constructed the way it is. Then I can truly enjoy it. I think it's all too easy to go to Florence and ooh and aah at the Duomo, [but] I want to know exactly why Brunelleschi did what he did with the dome."

After years of learning about wine for the sake of learning, Betz remains what he calls a "wine geek." "[He's] the only person I know," says Baseler, "who seems proud of that fact." Within moments of sitting down to taste through his new releases on a recent afternoon, Betz has drawn an eight-axis spider graph and is talking about monomeric anthocyanins and other technical components. His neatly trimmed white beard and runner's physique suggest the asceticism of a mathematics professor, while his questioning mind signals a mistrust of surface impressions. The wine is tannic. But are those skin tannins or seed tannins? The basket press is pushing down every 30 seconds. But is the quality of the juice coming out now as high as it was two minutes ago? The Betz credo is, "Let's find out."

Against conventional wisdom, Betz bottles no single-vineyard wines. Instead, he prefers to use the blending process to edge slowly, over the course of several months in most cases, toward the exact wine he wants to make.

Often that wine will have the characteristics of a wine he admires from one of the great viticultural regions of the world. Betz's Cabernet Sauvignons can have the depth of classified-growth Bordeaux. And while his Syrahs don't bear a stylistic resemblance to the wines of the Rhône Valley, they do show a restraint and depth that transcends most New World examples. "One of the weaknesses of so many New World winemakers is not understanding the classics," he says. "Not understanding what Riesling can do in the Pfalz or the difference between Meursault and Chablis. That's the greatest contribution that being a Master of Wine has given me—having a wider lens."

On this spring night, his lens is focused on the bottle of Château de Beaucastel Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2000 sitting on his dining-room table. Beside it sits the Joan d'Anguera Montsant El Bugader 2000, a Syrah blend from Tarragona in Spain, along with two of his own wines. Timing it to the second, he pulls the pizza out of the wood-burning oven and tells Cathy she can get the lamb started on the grill. He sits down and picks up the first of the four glasses in front of him, which holds the Bugader. His palate is ready and so is his mind. The pleasure is about to begin.