

Superstar sommelier
Greg Harrington
risked it all to create
the perfect Syrah.
Will he become the
toast of the nation
or get sour grapes?

the
CORKER

BY MELINDA MAHAFFEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN SEUBERT



TO THE OUTSIDE OBSERVER, owning a vineyard seems like a dream come true. What could be better than walking through the grapes at dusk, a glass of your own Merlot in hand, as the sun sets on your own surrounding masterpiece?

When I arrive at Va Piano Vineyards in Walla Walla, Washington, that fantasy comes alive. Driving through the entrance gates, down a graveled road and past lines of green vines, I crest a small hill and suddenly come upon the main house—a beautiful umber-colored build-

ing that looks like it came straight from Tuscany. *Va Piano* means “go softly” in Italian, and the atmosphere here is serene, with not even a bird disturbing the wide blue sky.

But a walk around the building to the cellar in the back disturbs this idyll. The notably un-Tuscan garage-looking cellar door has been raised open, and several oak barrels on metal racks sit near tall stainless steel vats on the hot concrete outside. A high-pressure washer hums nearby, and from this modern storage facility steps Greg Harrington, master sommelier and fledgling vintner. He’s not holding a glass of Merlot but a BlackBerry. After thumbing through his latest e-mails, he shatters any romantic notions of the industry with a single sentence: “Winemaking is 48 percent moving things, 48 percent cleaning things, and 4 percent drinking beer.” As proof, we’re spending two days racking, a simple yet time-consuming cleaning process that requires us to move barrels in and out of the cellar with a forklift. It’s wet work, and the owner of Gramercy Cellars is wearing a simple T-shirt. A half-empty beer bottle stands on the edge of one of the vats.

Though many people fantasize about leaving their ordinary jobs to pursue their dreams, the driven 36-year-old actually quit a successful career to do just that. Ten years ago, London’s prestigious Court of Master Sommeliers awarded him a diploma, a significant achievement at that tender age. He’s worked with celebrity chefs such as Emeril Lagasse and Wolfgang Puck. Anthony Bourdain praised him as “amazing” during a January episode of *No Reservations*, and he’s appeared on *Queer Eye for the Straight*



The 48 Percent Greg puts the winemaking axiom about ‘moving things’ to work.

Guy as a wine expert. *Food and Wine* in 2004 named him one of 35 “most fearsome talents” under 35. Now he travels across the country, teaching classes to aspiring sommeliers through the Master Sommeliers program. He recently started the Wine Workshops with three other Master Sommeliers to teach professionals about tasting, wine theory, and service. And he’s trying to get Gramercy Cellars off the ground. He’s also family, married to my aunt Pamela, a 32-year-old private equity recruiter whom he met four years ago and then married at a Seattle winery. To me, the fearsome talent goes by Greg.

While I’m in Walla Walla, I notice small signs of nervousness that mar Greg’s usual confidence. He frets over the color and taste of the wine as

if it’s a small child headed off to preschool; after all, for his debut vintage he’s made only one type of wine, Syrah. He thumbs his BlackBerry like an addict. He gets up at 6 a.m. to inspect this or that. He’s obsessed, there’s no doubt about it. The desire to succeed pushes him to make a wine he can truly feel proud of. His first bottles of Syrah debut on Oct. 1.

AS YOU READ THIS, Greg will be gearing up for the next harvest. Though picked now, these grapes—not just Syrah now but Cabernet, Merlot, Tempranillo, and some blending varieties as well—won’t see the inside of a bottle for months. Winemaking is a hurry-up-and-wait business. The time from the vine to the consumer runs about a year and a half to two years, with long periods of waiting interrupted by short bursts of activity. The Syrah that Greg bottled in the fall of 2005 will soon reach store shelves; the Cabernet Sauvignon that he laid in the cellar in the fall of 2006 continues to age; and the new batch of grapes for the ’07 vintage are ripe for the picking.

But for the first time, Greg this fall will use grapes he has planted and grown on his own 5-acre plot instead of buying them from someone else. He hasn’t built his own facilities, so he will continue making wine elsewhere. But these new grapes belong to his future—his own land, his own estate winery.

Greg launched Gramercy Cellars in this part of Washington for a reason. In the firmament of American winemaking, Walla Walla is the shooting star. The dry climate, similar to the Bordeaux region of France—which lies on the same latitude—is particularly suited to cultivating reds like Merlot, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon. Located at the bottom east corner of the state, a stone’s throw from Oregon, the town of 30,000 lies arguably in the middle of nowhere. Plopped down among rolling hills that change from emerald green to tan under a big sky that could give Montana a run for its money, Walla Walla is a surprising oasis of hip. The credit for that goes to the influx of winemakers from metropolitan areas and local universities like Whitman College. While the town has only three main restaurants, each one rivals those you’d find in Seattle or Chicago.

When asked about why he chose Walla Walla, Greg replies with certainty. “This is Napa 1975,” he says. “This is what guys like Mondavi and Grgich were doing back then. But this place is

Make-It-Yourself Wine

Why let Ernest and Julio have all the fun? If you dream of quitting your day job, moving the kids to one of America’s 188 official viticultural areas, and cultivating your own varieties, read on for next steps. If you don’t want to go *quite* that far, choose a lesser level of oenophilic obsession. Then put a cork in it.

Easy If you’d like to try your hand at winemaking but can spare only an hour, consider blending. By combining ready-made wines with proportions you select, you can invent the perfect taste for your palate. Though a few wineries offer blending tutorials on-site, would-be winemakers from many parts of the country can get in on the action by ordering a kit. (Note: Some states ban wine shipments.) The Blending Cellar (blendingcellar.com) will send you six different 375-milliliter bottles for \$100, while Urban Wine Works (urbanwineworks.com) offers three 375-milliliter bottles for \$75.

Intermediate If you want to get your hands dirty but don’t have a green thumb, try a homemade wine kit. Many websites sell

kits, but Homebrewers Outpost (homebrewers.com) is one of the few that posts the instructions online. That way, you can see what you’re getting before you buy. The \$150 complete winemaking starter kit comes with a fermenting bucket, a hydrometer, and other reusable essentials, along with a packet of ingredients of your choice. With a kit, you can make 30 bottles of wine in 28 days.

Advanced If you want to take your winemaking kit to the next level, cultivate a backyard patch of your own *Vitis vinifera* grapes. The ideal site will have full sun, poor soil, and decent drainage on a south-facing slope. To get the best varieties for your area, contact local winemakers or your local Cooperative Extension (csrees.usda.gov). Lay out your rows north to

south, seven to 10 feet apart. Plant the vines four to eight feet apart. One mature grape vine produces 15 pounds of grapes. That adds up to a gallon of vino.

Expert If you’re ready to quit your job and live the dream, start your own commercial winery. Bring a bankroll. Wine-friendly land in the Finger Lakes region of New York costs \$10,000 to \$30,000 an acre. Similar terrain in Napa, California, will run you \$150,000 to \$300,000 an acre. Tack on another \$8,000 to \$12,000 to purchase and plant the vines, plus labor costs and equipment. A small winery, for instance, could set you back as much as \$1.7 million over four years. The bad news: It takes four years for vines to yield a crop. The good news: You’re living the dream.

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going to explode much faster.” He’s right. Although the area’s oldest modern-day winery, Leonetti Cellar, opened in 1977, Walla Walla has boomed over the last seven years. The area boasts more than 100 wineries and counting. When I was here less than two years ago that number hovered somewhere around 70.

But after all the talk about weather and land—*terroir*, to the initiated—I suspect there’s another element of the town that appeals: Walla Walla specializes in small-town camaraderie. It’s the kind of place where, when you walk down Main Street—lined with restored historic redbrick buildings—people stop to talk. Walla Walla earns its nickname, “the town so nice they named it twice.”

That friendliness translates to wine-making. When I ask Lucas St. Clair, an aspiring winemaker from Seattle who’s in Walla Walla for a couple of days to learn from Greg and lend a hand, why he’s chosen this over another region like Napa, he scoffs. “They’re friendly—to a

point. Because everyone knows about Napa. But here, the more people that know about Washington wines, the better it is for everyone.”

As proof, Greg and I join Jason Huntley, his wife, Kirschten, and their guest, Gary Michelson, for a casual dinner at a former warehouse-turned-restaurant called Whitehouse-Crawford. Huntley splits his time between Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he works as an asset manager, and his native Walla Walla, where he owns Waters Winery. Being oenophiles, both Greg and Huntley bring bottles of Syrah to the table, plus a Brunello di Montalcino that Huntley bought from a friend with an extensive cellar. The waiter pours Greg’s ’05 Syrah into a clear glass decanter. All of us study the wine, comparing it to Huntley’s. The wine experts comment on subtle variations in color. They both look black to me.

For my benefit, Greg explains that the longer he keeps the wine, the more the fruity tones will start to disappear,



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Early Look Grapes far from the barrel and the bottle get a close inspection.

leaving an earthier flavor behind. Yes, it sounds like wine mumbo-jumbo, but I deliberately try to embrace the Syrah. It tastes lighter than the average red wine, a plus in my book. I can barely taste the spice that they're talking about. It comes at the end, like a little gift of pepper.

Toward the end of the three-hour dinner, Justin Vajgert, the national sales manager at a local winery called Reininger, appears at our table. Vajgert—who looks too young to drink—plops a glass of white wine in front of Greg that he's expected to name. It's clear that they've played this game before. Greg swills, sniffs, and declares—correctly—that it's a German wine. I'm impressed, but Greg just shrugs. "I can remember any wine once I've tasted it," he says. "It's the only thing I've got a good memory for. I'll watch a movie three times and not realize I've seen it until it gets about five minutes from the end."

Greg might blank on movies, but he knows the land around his new "high-

altitude" vineyard well (elevation: 1,300 feet). Just across the border in Oregon, the venture—nameless, but referred to as Octave—drew eight investors, including Greg and the owner of Va Piano, Justin Wylie. As we drive there in Greg's Toyota Tundra, passing roads with names like Ferndale and Yellowjacket, he sees the acres and acres of apple trees from his usual wine-oriented viewpoint. "I don't understand why people still grow apples," he says. "There's no money in it. This will eventually be all grapes," he says, shaking his head.

That change will come soon, as we pass another newly planted vineyard on the way up the hill. This second vineyard is an experiment. Just three weeks ago the partners planted five varietals that grow in Bordeaux. The view from the top is glorious: Rolling tan hills and the green squares of farmland lay below us, dotted with silver silos. Greg looks over to the next hill and says, almost wistfully, "It would be great to build a house there."

For the moment, though, Greg is house-less. Living the dream means living 270 miles away from his wife much of the time and sharing a rented apartment with a 1-year-old Doberman, Cana. That's the Latin word for dog, but even better, Cana is the city in the Bible where Jesus turned water into wine.

Though he doesn't come across as a worrier—he knows his business too

I can remember any wine once I've tasted it. It's the only thing I've got a good memory for. I'll watch a movie three times and not realize I've seen it.'

well for that—Greg sometimes seems to wonder if selling his new wine will take a miracle. More than once, I see the signals of trouble on the horizon, subtle as the color of Syrah. One question that

keeps being asked over and over again: *Will the wine sell?*

When we lunch with Wylie, he grills Greg on the business prospects in Texas, one of Gramercy's nine markets. Greg leans back in his chair and says, flippantly, "Well, everyone's telling me I can't sell it at all." I ask why Syrah—Gramercy's first and only offering this season—poses such problems, and neither of them can answer. It just does. Wylie assures Greg that any quality wine will sell, regardless of the type. Wylie would rather judge from his own sales anyway, and Syrah seems to be keeping up with Cabernet, at least for the moment.

At Whitehouse-Crawford, after the Syrahs have been decanted, I also overhear Huntley quietly offering Greg some support. "You should be happy with this first effort," he says. But for the '06 vintage, Greg has diversified: He just racked his 20 barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon, and he's working on Tempranillo, a Spanish grape that creates Rioja. And if the Syrah flops and next year's wines never sell? Then his dream will fail but not his entrepreneurialism. "Even if this Gramercy thing doesn't work out," Greg says, "I could never go back to working for someone else."

GREG KNOWS WINE; his talent is obvious to even the most casual observer. But for a man who is one of the youngest Americans to pass the Master Sommelier (M.S.) exam, he figured out his passion surprisingly late.

A native of Long Island, New York, Greg grew up cooking and working in mom-and-pop restaurants like Main Street Pasta in Smithtown. He says the owner, Frank Gramarossa, showed him that "there was better food out there than chicken parmigiano" and helped him get into the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. He went to college expecting to work as a kitchen designer or chef,

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but changed his mind after his first post-grad job, working as a line cook in Las Vegas, where his parents then lived. Food still has a hold over him; over dinner at Whitehouse-Crawford, he laments the lack of great Italian in Seattle and discusses the history of New York pizzeria Grimaldi's in Scottsdale, Arizona.

During a stint at his father's short-lived restaurant, Harrington's Steak House in

The Syrah tastes lighter than most red wine, a plus in my book. I can barely taste the spice that they're talking about. It comes at the end, like a little gift of pepper.

Las Vegas, one of the managers asked who had experience writing a wine list. Greg volunteered that he'd taken a class at Cornell but had nearly failed. That was more experience than anyone else had,

and Greg became the sommelier. At the same time, he met some people who were studying for the M.S. and began to hit the books with them. Within a year, he realized where his future lay—not with food, but with wine.

Greg decided to move to San Francisco, and took a job at Square One restaurant—as a manager. He wanted the position because he knew a Master Sommelier, Peter Granoff, worked there. But learning from Granoff took a little finagling. “I would go in on my days off, doing little tasks like cleaning the cellar or restocking,” Greg says. “One day, Peter caught me. Little by little, he let me into the wine program.” When Granoff left, Greg took over.

In 1993, Greg moved to New Orleans to work for Emeril Lagasse as a wine director. Five years there taught him to love the city's beignets. (Sure enough, after dinner on my last night, Greg and I headed over to local restaurant 26 Brix for dessert wines and the fluffy pastry.) But after receiving his M.S., he was flooded with offers. Lagasse generously told him to take the best one, ending his time in the Big Easy. His Gramercy label pays tribute to his time there, and Pam's father, a Louisiana native. Under the name and above the park gate that lines the bottom of the bottle reads “lagniappe,” a Creole word that means a special gift.

Greg's M.S. took him back to Las Vegas for five years. He started working for Southern Wine and Spirits, the No. 1 distributor in the country, and soon found himself advising Vegas casino moguls. “I was 28 years old, and I was sent over to help with the wine list at the brand-new Bellagio,” he says. “I'm standing in front of Steve Wynn! The guy I was with, the wine director at the new hotel, told him that he needed to invest in his wine list. And Steve Wynn turned to me, and said, ‘What do you think?’” Though nervous, Greg managed to agree.

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Less than a year later, Greg moved on to work for Wolfgang Puck as the wine director and associate partner of the Spago restaurants group. But the fast-lane lifestyle wore him down. "I was having too much fun in Vegas," he says. "I remember the day when I realized that I had to leave. I was talking to a waiter, and we were comparing the times we'd gotten in the night before. I'd gotten

'Coming back from Walla Walla, I think, I should open a winery. Our view went from "we'll do it when we're retired" to, "we'll do it in 10 years," to, "let's do it now."

home at 5 a.m. He'd gotten in around 10 a.m. And that was normal." Not much later, in 2001, he accepted a position as a partner and beverage director with BR Guest Restaurants in Manhattan,

overseeing the wine and spirits at the company's family of restaurants. There, he developed an extensive training program to teach the serving staff about wine. But one trip to Walla Walla in 2004 threw the final corkscrew into his career.

Before Greg and Pam visited Washington, he knew he wanted to make wine, at least someday. The standard of excellence he discovered there accelerated his timeline. "I'm there, and I'm thinking, *I'm not opening a winery,*" Greg says. "Then on the drive back, I think, *I should open a winery.* Our view went from 'we'll do it when we're retired' to 'we'll do it in 10 years' to 'let's do it now.'" The couple were fortunate to have the capital to make this sped-up dream a reality. When Pam's father died in 1999, she received an inheritance that helped bankroll the new venture. Gramercy is actually an ancient slang word meaning "big thank you," a combination of the French words *grand* (big) and *merci* (thanks).

It could as easily mean "hard work." Every morning that I'm in Walla Walla, Greg rises at 6 a.m., walking the dog or inspecting the land where he's growing his first batch of grapes. He reminds me of Martha Stewart, who supposedly sleeps only four hours a night. He's surprised that I'm not up at the crack of dawn with him. That's the key to the domestic diva's empire, and it'll be the key to Gramercy Cellars as well.

Keeping the dream on schedule exacts a price. Greg splits his time between his apartment in Walla Walla and his house with Pam in Seattle. Lately, the proportions have been off. "I haven't spent more than three days at a time out of the last four months at home," he says. Instead, he's going to wine fairs to meet consumers and wine distributors, and teaching courses around the country. When he went to the Texas Sommelier Conference this summer, he visited his brother, sister-in-law, and mother, who

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recently relocated there from Las Vegas. That was the first time he had meet his 1-year-old nephew. "My goals?" he asks. "I just want to spend more than a week at home—in Seattle."

BUT FOR NOW, Greg will travel, teach classes, and rustle up last-minute interest in the Syrah. He's working on his Master of Wine (M.W.) qualification, a program

that takes two years to complete and is comparable to a Master Sommelier. Only a handful of people earn both qualifications, and I sense that Greg wants to achieve the M.W. just because. His confident exterior remains, and as his winery grows—and I have no doubt it will—any insecurity he feels now will likely fade. The busyness probably won't. If you drive around Walla Walla on any

given day, Greg will be up at 6 a.m. on his way to Starbucks or already on the job. He may complain about the work, but he thrives on it. And so do his grapes.

This perfect match of obsessive person and obsessive profession can crop up in almost any conversation with Greg. During that dinner at Whitehouse-Crawford, he told us the story of his hunt for the family pierogi recipe. When his Polish grandmother died three years ago, he thought the secret was lost forever. Greg was upset, worried that these traditional recipes would vanish now that kids spend more time on video games than in the kitchen. He called his mother to see if she knew the recipe, but she remembered only how to make the various fillings, not the shell. Of course, he couldn't let it go. He finally had his mother track down the rest of the recipe through relatives. There, at the restaurant, Greg reveled in the memory, reliving the moment his hard work turned a lost cause into a feast for the senses.

Melinda Mahaffey is the assistant managing editor of this magazine.

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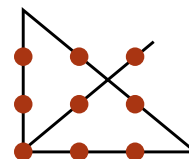
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