

WASHINGTON CEO

Essential Perspectives for Northwest Decision Makers

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Turnaround
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Wine

By Christina Kelly

Blessed Blend Va Piano Vineyards

Justin Wylie is a bit like the tortoise in the fable – he moves slowly and methodically, but in the end wins the race, or, as with his new Walla Walla winery, wins the appreciation of wine enthusiasts everywhere.

Wylie is the winemaker for Va Piano Vineyards, which means to “go slowly” in Italian. It has taken him seven years to get his Tuscan-style winery off the ground, but after years at a steady pace, Wylie released his 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah this year to high acclaim.

“Yeah, it has only taken me seven years,” he says with a laugh. “But I wanted to do it right, and I can finally see light at the end of the tunnel.”

In addition to his first two new releases this year, Wylie has a special project that blends art and winemaking. Va Piano introduced a new table wine during the summer with a familiar name for the Northwest. “Bruno’s Blend” is a collaboration between Wylie and Father Bruno Segatta, a beloved former assistant dean at Gonzaga University in Spokane. Segatta ran the Spokane-to-Florence, Italy, study program for 23 years. Based in Florence, Segatta left the university a few years ago when the administration revamped the study course, but he is well known in Washington, Oregon and California and often returns to the Northwest to preside over the marriages of former students or visit with their families.

For the past few years, Bruno – as everyone calls him – has traveled to Third World countries, raising money to help the poor by selling his paintings. But living a gypsy lifestyle, he never did sell that much of his artwork.

Wylie, a marketing graduate of Gonzaga who participated in the one-year Florence program in the late 1990s, has fond memories of Bruno from his year in Italy. The 33-year-old recently visited Florence with his wife, Liz, looking for inspiration to make a new red table wine. They hooked up with Bruno immediately.

“We were on a train talking to Bruno when it suddenly dawned on me how I could sell a red table wine and help Bruno sell his art,” says Wylie. “I told him we could make a wine in his honor –

Bruno’s Blend – and feature his artwork on the label.”

With thousands of people touched by Bruno through the study abroad program, Wylie figured he would have a ready market for the blend and help the priest fund his charitable causes. A portion of the proceeds from wine sales will help fund Bruno’s outreach to needy families.



Father Bruno Segatta's pastoral paintings now grace the labels of Va Piano wines.

As he thinks about the potential for good from selling this wine, Bruno is reminded of one family in particular. This past year, Bruno took a personal journey to Africa and sold his paintings to help a man who is raising his children and those of his sister and brother (both of whom died of AIDS), for a total of 18 children.

“He is a great man and the tragedy is that he has a 13-year-old who is blind and in need of brain surgery,” Bruno says. “With the money I got from selling my paintings, we bought rice and maize and a little bit of chicken meat and it was a feast for his family.”

Bruno says the wine labels have created new demand for his art. “Justin and Liz are making it possible for me to sell my paintings, so I have the money to help feed a family and help heal a kid.”

Wylie says Bruno is a mother hen with an attitude: “I’ve never known a character like him.”

A former student described Bruno as someone who can hop a train at a moment’s notice to an unknown locale, befriend an otherwise hostile group of locals, share a meal and some drink with them, sleep on their otherwise private beach, toast the rising sun and still make it back to Florence in time to celebrate mass on the pillar of a bridge. The priest has been an inspiration for countless individuals over many decades.

Christina Kelly has covered the Northwest wine industry for seven years. She can be reached at winewriter@comcast.net.

BRUNO’S BLEND is a tasty wine, with black fruits and cherry in the mouth. It’s a big wine that will work with beef and lamb dishes, as well as being a flavorful pre-dinner drink. It’s a blend of 73 percent Syrah from the Va Piano estate, 18 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 9 percent Merlot from Lewis, Cold Creek, Milbrandt and Seven Hills vineyards. The label will change yearly to showcase one of Bruno’s paintings. \$23

The **2003 Cabernet Sauvignon** is a terrific blend of 90 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 10 percent Merlot from Wylie’s own estate vineyards. The flavors captured are full-bodied and dense, with an exceptional mouth feel balanced by a polished tannin structure. This wine has intense fruit characters of black cherry, cassia and black licorice in the nose. \$38

The **2003 Syrah** is a blend of Lewis Vineyard and Va Piano Estate fruit and showcases a deep, rich black cherry, plum and blueberry aromas. It is well balanced with fruit and acidity, with the backing of seamless tannin structure and a lingering, silky finish. \$38

RECOMMENDATIONS

