

Seven years of pinots, pomerols and personalities

By **PATRICIA DUFF**
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Vino Amore Wine Shop at Freeland Center celebrates seven years in business this week, and its owners are looking forward to many more fruitful years to come.

Wife and husband owners Gail Liston and Brian Plebanek have built the business from the ground up.

"The last seven years have been quite an adventure," Liston said.

"The wine business is a pretty pleasant one. We have great customers who have also become our friends. Between tastings, classes, winery visits and wine dinners we've learned so much."

Having started in 2002 with a shop only half full, Vino Amore now carries more than 1,200 labels with cases of wine lining the floor and bottles stacked to the rafters.

The couple has toured vineyards, met winemakers from all over the region and sometimes have had the privilege of watching the vintners at work while they continue to discover new, unusual and exciting wines from all over the world.

"Wine is so vast. You can never know it all, you can never taste it all, but you can sure try," Liston added.

And try they have, starting with one early eye-opening trip to Walla Walla to Cougar Crest Winery.

There they met winemaker Debbie Hansen, who was precariously perched atop a high stool above the fermentation tanks in the process of hand-punching caps.

It's a process that every vintner must do regularly after the grapes are destemmed and crushed and stored in stainless-steel tanks.

The juice, skins and seeds are allowed to ferment and eventually form a cap on top of the juice. This cap is punched down into the fermenting juice every six hours by hand, using an air cylinder device which serves to gently extract more color and character from the skins.

The Vino Amore owners were impressed, and thus began their exploration of the art of making good wine.

"This is pretty sweaty, non-glamorous and possibly dangerous work," Liston said.

"More than one winemaker has fallen into the tanks. She had us taste grapes out of the tanks that were tiny, very sweet with crunchy nutty seeds. We later tasted some finished wine, and it was exquisite. I remember marveling at the fact that such beautiful stuff came from such humble beginnings."

They would be guided through several vineyards through the years, including Boushey Vineyards in the Yakima Valley, where the owner proudly drove them through rows and rows of his prized vines while at another Yakima vineyard called Badger Mountain Winery, the couple met wine industry pioneer Bill Powers.

Powers, a wine maker credited with being the first to go organic, told them stories of growing up in the valley where kids would follow behind DDT trucks on hot days, trying to cool off in the spray.

"Bill lost many of his old friends to cancer," Liston said.

"He used organic methods before it was fashionable, because it was the right thing to do."

Getting to know the winemakers has influenced these winesellers in a way that informs their choices and their unflappable search for wine that suits their customers' tastes in all price ranges.

"One of the things we enjoy most is helping our customers with food and wine combinations," Liston said.

"We encourage people to bring in their recipes, and then we try to find an exciting, interesting wine that will make the meal really special."

The intimacy of Whidbey has lent itself to Vino Amore's style.

The couple said they like getting to know their customers, whether through the shop's regular wine tastings or via drop-by visits to the store. It's the personal touch that makes the business of selling wine interesting and fun, they said.

"We often taste wines and say to each other, 'This is a Nora wine,' or 'I bet Lew would like this,' or 'We've got to bring this in for Carol.' It's all very personal to us. We never feel like we are just moving merchandise to the masses."

Seven years later, Liston and Plebenak are still toasting, and still tasting.

Saturday tastings are noon to 6 p.m.

Vino Amore Wine Shop is at 5565 Vanbarr Place, Freeland. Call 331-7661

