

Longtime Walla Walla winery Tamarack Cellars changes hands

Vicki Hillhouse Jan 14, 2018

Tamarack Cellars, the pioneer winery that planted roots in a renovated World War II Army air base firehouse 20 years ago and honored it with an acclaimed signature red blend, is changing hands.

Santa Rosa wine company Vintage Wine Estates will acquire the winery in a purchase expected to close Tuesday, the businesses have announced.

The sale caps a more than 25-year career in the wine industry for Ron Coleman, who started the business with his wife, Jamie, in 1998.

It establishes a base for the growing Vintage Wine Estates and a Northwest footprint that has included brands developed by Middleton Family Wines but until now with no official home.

It also continues a series of sales in recent years of some of Walla Walla's early wineries, including Seven Hills Winery and Walla Walla Vintners.

"It's the natural maturation of the industry," said Coleman, 66.

With a 30-person sales force, Vintage Wine Estates is positioned to build the business, Coleman said.

"It's going to be good for the Walla Walla wine industry," he said. "They've got 30 people out there that are now going to be preaching the gospel of Washington state wine."

The transaction between Tamarack and Vintage Wine Estates was brokered by Walla Walla Erik McLaughlin of Metis. The firm, an Exvere Company, has offices in Seattle, Walla Walla and the Willamette Valley. It advises Northwest businesses on

mergers, acquisitions and recapitalizations with a focus on wine, adult beverage and hospitality industries. The company also coordinated the purchase of Red Lion Inn to Columbia Hospitality in a changeover announced late last week.

The Tamarack acquisition includes inventory, grower contracts and the tasting room. Financial terms of the purchase were not disclosed.

Tamarack case production has been around 25,000 cases. Vintage Wine Estates President and CEO Pat Roney said he hopes to take it to 50,000 or 60,000 cases.

The company is owned by a group of vintner families with a collection of winery estates and brands. Among them: Clos Pegase Winery, Consentino Winery, Viansa Sonoma, Middle Sister, Pro-mis-Q-ous, Girl & Dragon and a number of exclusive wine brands.

The purchase of Tamarack follows the recent acquisition of California brands Layer Cake, Cherry Pie and If You See Kay, which closed Jan. 2.

The outfit also offers custom wines and distributes the Walla Walla Bing Bang label in Kroger stores. Roney said its private labels for retailers such as Costco, Trader Joe's and Total Wines also offers opportunities for growth.

With the Tamarack purchase, all personnel will be retained. That includes longtime winemaker Danny Gordon, who will continue crafting the merlot, cabernet sauvignon and the Firehouse Red blend for which the winery has built its reputation and consistently received mid-90s wine scores.

"Tamarack is a great winery with great history," Roney said.

"Walla Walla is a kind of little mecca of Washington with great tourism, people, a whole college atmosphere ... We're excited we're going to be a part of the community and look forward to promoting Tamarack and Walla Walla in general."

The retirement from the wine industry will have no impact on the Colemans' other venture, the Ice-Burg Drive-In.

“There’s one Ice-Burg in Walla Walla. There’s one Ice-Burg in the world. But there are more than 120 wineries,” Coleman said. “It’s a different kind of competition.”

Coleman and his wife moved to the community in 1993 with a mission for Jamie to work in ophthalmology and Ron to pursue his interest in wine. He carried his experience as a wine wholesaler in Seattle and later as a sommelier and retail wine store manager to Waterbrook Winery.

“At that time there were five wineries in town,” he reminisced. “Things have changed. We never thought it would end up like this. No one saw it coming.”

When Tamarack began in 1998 its first vintage was 300 cases of merlot and a commitment to handcrafted quality at a great price. Two of three times the winery bade Wine Spectators Top 100 it was for the Firehouse Red, which retails for less than \$20 a bottle.

In the hands of Vintage Wine Estates, Coleman said he’s comforted for the staff and the future of the winery he started.

“It feels really good to have sold it,” he said. “The thing I like best about selling to Vintage Wine Estates is they are pros. They know what they’re doing. And the reason those pros looked at the place and bought it is because the people at Tamarack. They’re going to sail.”

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