



SERPENT RIDGE VINEYARD

NEW MARYLAND WINERY IS COILED FOR SUCCESS

By Marguerite Thomas, Eastern correspondent



Neighboring Virginia burst out of the starting gate a few years before Maryland entered the modern-day winemaking world. In 2001, Virginia laid claim to 65 wineries; Maryland trailed with a scant 11. A decade later, Maryland boasts 52 licensed wineries, with an additional 22 growers expressing interest in becoming vintners in the next five

to seven years. Maryland is now clearly in the race.

One of the state's newest arrivals is Serpent Ridge Vineyard, whose owners, Karen and Greg Lambrecht, demonstrate the kind of dynamic, lucid and forward-thinking approach to winemaking that seems characteristic of the new breed of Maryland vintners.

The Lambrechts planted the first

Serpent Ridge vineyard in 2004, produced their first vintage in 2007, and opened the tasting room in 2009. Talk about a whirlwind journey! But what prompted this former nurse and the retired Coast Guard lieutenant commander to head down a path so wildly divergent from their familiar existence and routines? If you could sum up their life-changing decision in one

word, it would surely be "passion." Although they probably didn't know it at the time, they were following Warren Buffet's advice for achieving success and happiness: "Find out what turns you on."

For the Lambrechts, the passion was deeper than an impulsive desire to embrace a trendy lifestyle. They each had at least some past exposure to wine appreciation and winemaking, Karen from having grown up in a home-winemaking family, Greg from contact with California wine country while he was in the Coast Guard. As they approached career retirement, the idea of making their own wine took hold, and the Lambrechts set about turning what had been a vague fantasy into reality.

Greg read everything he could find about winemaking, and enrolled in classes at UC Davis. The Lambrechts were already growing grapes in their backyard, but since they would need more acreage for



Greg and Karen Lambrecht are pursuing their winemaking dream with a firm base in reality. Photo: Marguerite Thomas

a commercial vineyard, the search for the right site was on. They were certain that Maryland would be an auspicious, if demanding, region, and the challenge of playing a role in an emerging viticultural area appealed to them.

They soon found a promising piece of land just shy of six acres in the bucolic countryside of Carroll County. "One of the things that appealed to us about this site was that the soils and drainage are basically good," Karen explained. "We had to add lime when the pH was low, but that's been about it."

Well-drained and moderately sloped, the Serpent Ridge vineyard has relatively deep loamy, rocky soil known as Mt. Airy Series, with a surface of grayish-brown loam

and a subsoil of light silt loam. It contains a considerable amount of schist fragments from which the soil was derived. After the soil was sent for testing by two different laboratories, the results were reviewed by friends in the industry, who told the Lambrechts that it had excellent potential for producing quality vinifera grapes.

Another advantage to the location is that Carroll County, roughly 30 miles northwest of downtown Baltimore, is readily accessible to day-tripping wine tasters. And as a member of the Maryland Wineries Association, Serpent Ridge is able to draw visitors from the Wine Trails maps. To attract local visitors, Serpent Ridge sponsors live music performances at the winery on Friday evenings during the summer, and guests are encouraged to bring a picnic to enjoy (with a bottle of wine, of course).

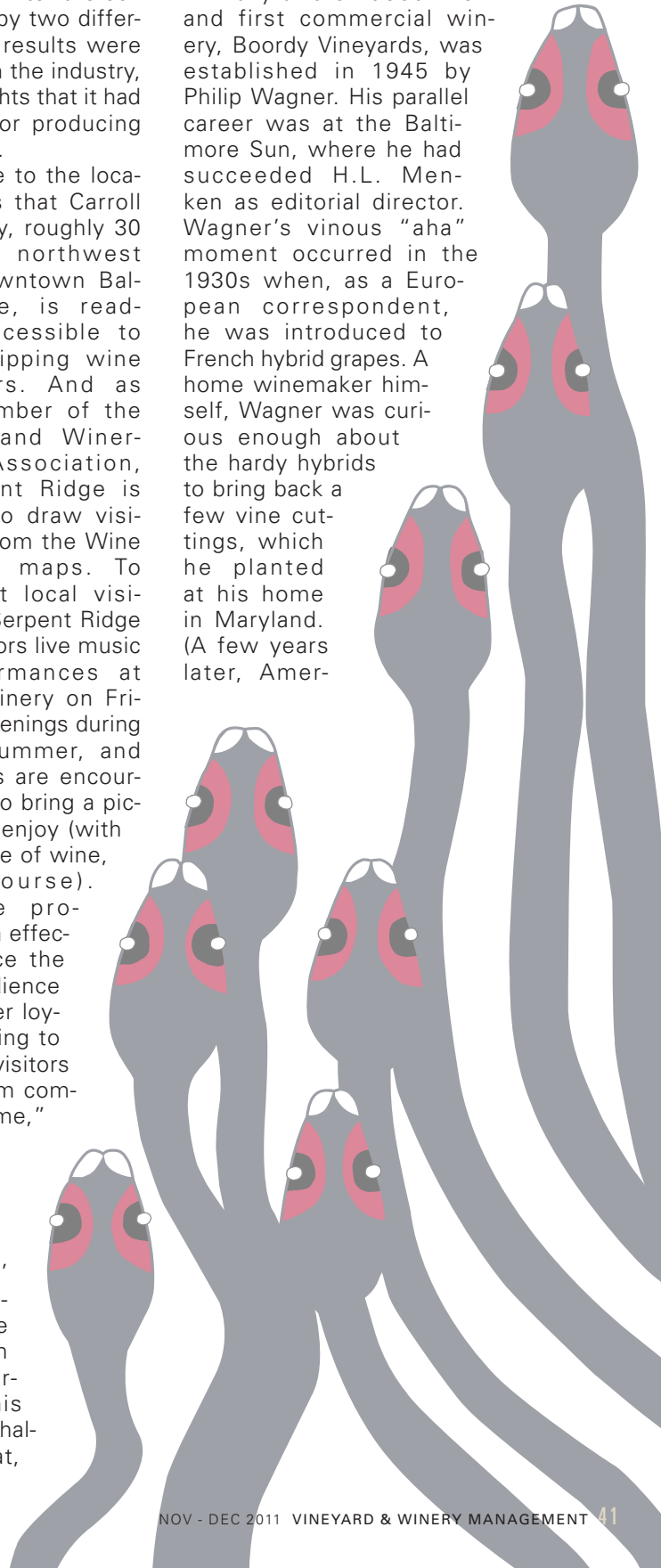
These programs have proved an effective way to introduce the wines to a larger audience and to build consumer loyalty. "It's been amazing to us how many return visitors we get, many of them coming back time after time," Karen noted.

BUILDING UPON HISTORY

The Lambrechts' goal from the beginning was to make wines that are both classy and commercially appealing. This objective may seem challenging in a state that,

until its most recent history, had not made the leap into world-class winemaking.

Maryland's best-known and first commercial winery, Boordy Vineyards, was established in 1945 by Philip Wagner. His parallel career was at the Baltimore Sun, where he had succeeded H.L. Menken as editorial director. Wagner's vinous "aha" moment occurred in the 1930s when, as a European correspondent, he was introduced to French hybrid grapes. A home winemaker himself, Wagner was curious enough about the hardy hybrids to bring back a few vine cuttings, which he planted at his home in Maryland. (A few years later, Amer-



ica's first vial vines were "smuggled" into the country wrapped in damp towels in Jocelyn Wagner's handbag).

In an era before changes in technology and climate made it possible to successfully grow European *Vitis vinifera* in the East, Philip and Jocelyn Wagner were convinced that French hybrids produced more appealing wine than native American grapes. Hybrids, they thought, would be the solution to the problems of eastern viticulture.

The Wagners established a small nursery in Maryland where they propagated French-American hybrid grapes, and they were soon selling vine cuttings throughout the United States. These efforts, augmented by Philip's 1933 book "American Wines and How to Make Them," helped inspire the revival of the nation's wine industry, which had been devastated by Prohibition.

At Boordy Vineyards, Philip produced what he described as "wines that taste like wine." Tirelessly promoting the American wine industry, the Wagners would influence an entire generation of winemakers, especially in the eastern United States. Philip Wagner died in 1997 at age 92.

In 1980, Rob Deford, a friend of the Wagners and one of their contract grapegrowers, purchased Boordy and relocated it a few miles away to his own 250-acre farm in scenic Long Green Valley. Deford, who studied enology and viticulture

at UC Davis, continued to produce wines dominated by seyval, vial and other hybrids, as did most of his generation of Maryland vintners.

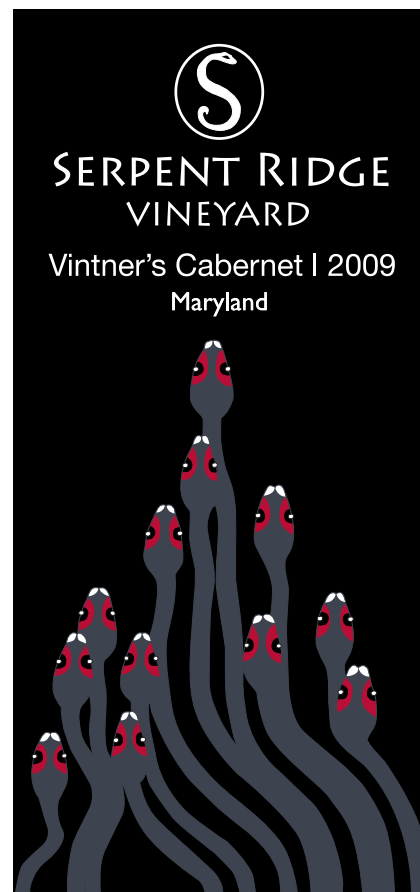
A few like-minded pioneers, including Mike Fiore and Bert Basignani at their eponymous wineries, and Al Copp at Woodhall Wine Cellars (all of which opened in the early 1980s), soon began experimenting with chardonnay, merlot and cabernet in addition to the hybrids they relied upon. A quarter of a century later, every one of these estates is now producing a substantial amount of dry vinifera wines. They have by no means abandoned hybrids, however, which are more dependable in the vineyard, predictable in the winemaking process, and remain popular with seasoned consumers who flock to the wineries for them.

NEXT GENERATION VINTNERS

At the youngest generation of Maryland wineries such as Black Ankle Vineyards, Knob Hall Winery and Bordeleau Vineyards and Winery, a different perspective has taken hold. The new arrivals zealously pursue the dream of producing wines that might compete on the world stage. They are equally dedicated to the concept of collaboration with their peers.

"We are all supportive of each other, and we're committed to producing quality wines," Greg Lambrecht said. "I'm really excited to

see new people coming on, like Jay and Ginger Baker at Old Westminster Winery. If we could just get more dedicated people like them, it would be great for all of us. Since all boats do rise with the tide, we love to see this renaissance of Maryland wineries. It bodes well for the state's wine industry overall."



Greg Lambrecht works hard to avoid green characteristics in his Vintner's Cabernet.

SERPENT RIDGE VINEYARD

- **Founded:** 2002
- **Location:** Westminster, Md.
- **Principals:** Karen and Greg Lambrecht, owners; winemaker, Greg Lambrecht; vineyard manager, Craig Beach; tasting room manager, Sheri Incher.
- **Vineyard Acreage:** Three acres currently under vine at Serpent Ridge. Contract grapegrowing in two other Carroll County vineyards (Copernica Vineyard and Galloping Goose Vineyard), plus J. Rose Vineyard in Montgomery County and McClure Family Vineyard in Baltimore County.
- **Main Varieties/Acreage:** 1.5 acres of cabernet franc, .75 acre of cabernet sauvignon, 7.5 acres of albariño and a small amount of sangiovese
- **Annual Production:** 1,200-1,500 cases

When asked to describe some of the differences between the newest wave of vintners and their predecessors, Greg didn't hesitate. "One thing as we head toward a generally higher quality of wine is getting away from putting sugar in wines," he said. "Another thing that bugs me about Maryland wines has been the tendency toward greenness in cabernet."

As if to prove his point, he handed me a glass of his 2008 Vintner's Cabernet. "Do you taste any green-

ness in it?" he asked. I didn't. What I tasted was nicely rounded, ripe (but not overly ripe) fruit, with flavor nuances of black cherry and mild oak. The wine was relatively lush in taste and texture. There was certainly no off-putting hint of greenness.

"That's right, it doesn't have the greener character that you find in too many Maryland red wines," he said. "I just don't believe you should accept that in a wine. I think it's an East Coast issue, and I think we can mitigate it with proper canopy management. But it does take work and care."

CARE IN THE VINEYARD

The Lambrechts sought someone with up-to-date as well as local viticultural knowledge to manage the Serpent Ridge vineyard. Craig Beach got his training through a program offered by the Maryland Agricultural Resource Center (MARC), a not-for-profit organization that retrains people looking to make a career change into agriculture or viticulture. MARC's mission includes helping farmers develop agricultural operations that are economically viable and environmentally sustainable.

Under Beach's supervision, the first three of Serpent Ridge's five

acres have been planted (most of the plant material was sourced from Double A Vineyards Inc., a nursery in upstate New York). Additional grapes are purchased from local growers.

Karen and Greg Lambrecht had



Despite being difficult to ripen in Maryland, sangiovese has become a promising variety for Serpent Ridge. Photo: Marguerite Thomas

clear ideas from the get-go about grape varieties. With limited land and resources, they knew they weren't in a position to embark on experimental viticulture. "We only wanted to have what does well in Maryland," Karen said. Thick-skinned cabernet franc, one of the most successful varieties in the East, was an obvious choice, as was chardonnay.

"Norton didn't do well here, but cabernet sauvignon seems very promising," she said. "We're also hopeful about this albariño," she added, pointing toward a small plot of 4-year-old vines at the top of a gently sloping hill. "Virginia has been doing very well with it, as has Black Ankle, our neighbors down the road."

Black Ankle's albariño, in fact, has been so successful that demand has outstripped supply; after having to buy back some wine from customers in order to have enough to pour at an event in California earlier this year, the owners decided to plant another 20 acres of the variety, doubling its vineyard size.

"In Maryland, sangiovese is hard to ripen, and it's hard to get good color extraction," Greg Lambrecht said. "Until recently, we were just selling the grapes, but last year our sangiovese was very successful,

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and right now the 2011 vintage is looking phenomenal. In fact, I've been amazed at how popular Italian varieties in general are with consumers."

Serpent Ridge wines range in price from \$16 to \$34. The popular flagship wines are cabernet blends, named Basilisk and Vintner's Cabernet. Both wines, Greg said, showcase the terroir of west-central Maryland in general, and Serpent Ridge in particular. The wines, both blends of cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc, have won numerous state and international awards.

tage of every available opportunity to create an impact. "Our aim is to get a bottle of wine in consumers' hands, whether it's through our unique name, our colorful labels or our unusual Zork bottle closures," he said.

"I first saw the Zork closures in Australia shortly after they were invented," Lambrecht said. "Then I came across them at Wineries Unlimited (the annual conference and trade show organized by Vineyard & Winery Management) and absolutely fell in love with them. It's a great product, and they really

1,200-1,500 cases, but with recently added tank space, the Lambrechts plan to hit 2,500 cases. The production area is a modest 1,400 square feet, and the tasting room is 1,000 square feet.

Despite the inevitable glitches and setbacks common to all new enterprises, the Lambrechts' genuine and palpable passion for what they are creating at Serpent Ridge enables them to meet most challenges with grace and good humor. They willingly admit to having had their share of sleepless nights, but their ability to respond to events, both good and bad, with a blend of levelheadedness and creativity bodes well for Serpent Ridge's enduring success.

"As a winemaker, I measure the success of our winery not by the simple 'bottom line' or medals won in competitions, but by praise and recognition received from peers, customers and retailers," Greg noted. "We cherish the numerous state and international medals we have received, but the only way to gain and maintain success is through continued quality wine-making."

Until the winery truly takes off, the Lambrechts are keeping their day jobs; Greg is currently the vice president of Metal Shark Aluminum Boats and Karen works as a corporate account manager for Amgen.

As the late entrepreneurial whiz Steve Jobs said, "There is no reason not to follow your heart." He's right, of course, yet the Lambrechts demonstrate that having your head engaged as well is an indispensable asset. ■



Serpent Ridge wines have won medals in wine competitions across the country and internationally. Photo: Marguerite Thomas

One of the Lambrechts' strengths is their inclination to seek innovative alternatives to routine challenges. Coming up with a name for the new winery offered an opportunity for creative thinking. "We tossed all the predictable ideas around with a label designer we were working with. The obvious names were too predictable, too boring, too simple," Greg said.

Then they came up with the serpent theme, inspired by a den of snakes Greg uncovered while he was plowing the hillside destined to become the couple's first vineyard. The name, he explained, exemplifies their resolve to take advan-

grab people's attention. Any time you can show something new is great for business."

The Lambrechts make no claim to having done everything perfectly. If anyone contemplating building a winery were to ask Karen for advice, she would say unequivocally: "Build it bigger!" The Lambrechts have encountered plenty of problems due to limited space in the winery, especially when they've had to move equipment in and out. "No matter how much space you estimate you'll need, it won't be enough," she emphasized. "Build it bigger, and build it higher."

Annual production averages

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Marguerite Thomas is a Baltimore-based journalist and photographer who contributes wine-related articles to several national and international publications. She is the author of the books "Wineries of the Eastern States" and "Visiting East Coast Wineries."

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 Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwm-online.com.