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Oregon winery's Paramour built on Spanish tradition of reserve Tempranillos

By Andy Perdue and Eric Degerman, Wine Press Northwest

Abacela founder Earl Jones says proudly, "This is the wine we came to Oregon to make."

In October, the Umpqua Valley winemaker lifted the veil on his secret project -- Paramour -- a proprietary red blend from the 2005 vintage with the robust Spanish grape Tempranillo as the base.

"American Tempranillo will change forever" is how the Roseburg winery promoted the invitation-only evening.

Jones repeatedly, although good-naturedly, declined to list the components of the blend. He said it was built in the Spanish tradition of Gran Reserva wines from the Rioja and Ribera del Duero regions of the Iberian Peninsula, which specifies such wines as being aged five years and the product of an excellent growing season.

Indeed, the 2005 vintage is viewed as one of the Northwest's best of the young century.

The production was 170 cases, and the 2005 Paramour (\$90) ranks as one of Oregon's most expensive wines not made from Pinot Noir grapes.

"I hadn't even thought about that," Jones said. "I know the economy is down, but I think it's priced fairly."

This year, Abacela released about 2,500 cases of robust Tempranillo among its three tiers -- regular (\$20), estate (\$35) and reserve (\$45).

The 2005 Paramour spans winemakers past and present, Kiley Evans and Andrew Wenzl, respectively. And yet Jones, director of the Tempranillo Advocates Producers and Amigos Society (TAPAS), takes full credit for this unique Temp.

"This was my project," he said. "I've kept it close to my chest. It was tough keeping those six barrels a secret, though."

Ironically, the public got its first glimpse of Paramour two years ago when Jones donated three large-format bottles of it to the 25th annual Classic Wine Auction in Portland. The gift of the 2005 Paramour came as he celebrated being named the 2009 Oregon Vintner of the Year.

"The 2005 vintage was a great one here at Abacela, and my read on the wine is that it hasn't peaked," Jones said. "I'm estimating that will be around 2017, and it probably will set on that plateau for 10 years."

Jones views Paramour as the culmination of efforts that began in 1995 when he became the first in the Northwest to plant Tempranillo. He uprooted his family from the Florida Panhandle and transitioned from a decorated career in clinical dermatology to create world-class Tempranillo in the United States.

"Paramour translates as 'other love' or 'mistress,' " he said. "We've dedicated so much time and attention to this, it's a good way to describe it."

Those who miss out on this Paramour must wait a while for the next vintage. Jones doesn't expect to release the next one -- the 2009 Paramour

-- until 2015.

We recently blind-tasted the 2005 Paramour, as well as Abacela's 2007 Reserve Tempranillo. To find Abacela wines, check with your favorite wine merchant or contact Abacela directly at (541) 679-6642.

Abacela 2005 Paramour, Umpqua Valley, \$90. This spent nearly two years in French oak and another four years in bottle before being released this fall. It opens with aromas of black cherries, black currants, blueberries, fresh figs, leather, cola and caramel. On the palate, it explodes with flavors of marionberries, black currants and caramel. It's a big wine with robust tannins and earthy tones.

Abacela 2007 Reserve Tempranillo, Umpqua Valley, \$45. As of this fall, Abacela now produces no fewer than three different bottlings of Tempranillo (and the grape finds its way into some of the winery's other wines). This superb reserve-level red opens with intriguing aromas of purple fruit, late, orange pekoe tea, lemon zest, plums and chalk dust. On the palate, it shows off flavors of caramel, plums, cinnamon and something that reminds us of a grape lollipop.

Andy Perdue and Eric Degerman are the editors of Wine Press Northwest magazine. For the freshest reviews, go to www.winepressnw.com/freshpress.

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