



Milbrandt Vineyards

By Tim Kukes

wine brothers.

- Jerry Milbrandt
Milbrandt Vineyards

Milbrandt Vineyards Courtesy Photos



“We’re going to continue to grow and produce quality wine.”

- Butch Milbrandt
Milbrandt Vineyards

Milbrandt Vineyards has its roots in the hearts of two 4th generation farmers and soils of the Columbia Basin. Butch and Jerry Milbrandt have converted an apples and potatoes operation into a well-known wine label that is now in all 50 states and six foreign countries.

Born in Oregon, the Milbrandt brothers are descended from farmers who emigrated from Germany and farmed in Nebraska in the 1800s. They moved to the Columbia Basin from eastern Oregon in 1954 when their father decided to purchase 160 acres near Quincy at \$40 an acre due to the readily accessible water from the Columbia Basin Project. The family started growing alfalfa hay, potatoes and wheat. That all changed in 1997.

“We weren’t really interested in grapes,” Butch Milbrandt said. “At the time we were mostly growing apples and potatoes, but there was a freeze in 96.”

According to Milbrandt, Washington produced 75,000 tons of wine grapes in 1995, but in February of 1996 there was a freeze and the state only produced 35,000 tons. In reaction to this event, Chateau Ste. Michelle winery decided they would produce more wine than needed to make up for any shortfalls in production. To this end they contacted the Milbrandt brothers to discuss the option of well-established farmers growing grapes for the winery.

“So we started growing grapes for them in 97’ on the Wahluke Slope,” Milbrandt said. “Then we just continued to plant grapes each year and at one point we were selling grapes to 50 wineries in the state.”

They started with 80 acres and added another 140 acres in 1998. In the beginning

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- Butch Milbrandt
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they employed one or two full-time employees – Butch was active in the vineyards at that time – and 10 to 15 part-time employees to help with planting and trellis construction.

There was no doubt in Milbrandt's mind that growing grapes was the right move at the time.

"I thought it was going to be successful from the get go because of the location we had on the Wahluke Slope, which is one of the premium grape growing regions of Washington, and we had a 5-year contract with the largest winery in the state," Milbrandt said. "So, barring any weather phenomena there wasn't any reason not to be successful. You had a little learning curve there going from apples to grapes, but there are plenty of consultants and field men to guide you along."

Since then the Milbrandt's have added 100 to 200 acres of vineyards a year. Today they have 12 distinct estate vineyards for a total of approximately 2500 acres and employ approximately 40 full-time employees and up to an additional 200 employees seasonally across the vineyards.

The vineyards are spread out between the Wahluke Slope area, near Mattawa, Wash., and the Ancient Lakes area in the vicinity of Quincy, Wash. The Wahluke Slope is primarily used for the growing of red grapes, while the Ancient Lakes area, which is approximately a 1000 feet higher in elevation and has a shorter growing season, is used for the growing of white grapes – which Milbrandt said it is well suited for.

The progressive growth of the Milbrandt's operation prompted the opening of their own winery in 2005 and started selling wine under their own label. Opening the winery added another 30 employees to the Milbrandt family operation, 2 million gallons a year in wine production and the need to increase marketing efforts.

To help facilitate this, Milbrandt Vineyards opened their tasting room in Prosser, Wash., in 2008.

"You have to have a face for your brand," Milbrandt said. "There has to be some place where people can go and look at you, interact with you, taste the wine, go to dinner – things of that nature."

The farm and winery locations were considered too remote and rural for the location, but Prosser offered an idea location due to its already established wineries and tasting rooms in the area – not to mention easy access from I-82.

Milbrandt said that the most challenging aspect of the vineyard and winery business is marketing. In their case they didn't have to worry about marketing right away, but as they expanded their grape growing operation they had to find homes for that fruit. But it takes time to develop the reputation necessary to sell the grapes – the vineyard needs to have a proven track record.

"You have to have a good site," Milbrandt said. "[You] have to be pretty well located as to a good grape growing area, that area has to have some history of producing quality fruit, and then you have to create relationships

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with those wineries which takes some time because you have to get your grapes into production, you have to market them, and they have to see the results.”

Milbrandt Vineyards continues to look for growth opportunities though. They are currently seeking out a possible site for a second tasting room in the Seattle area. A winery can have only two tasting rooms according to Washington State law.

“We’ve pretty much gone through the quick growth cycle and now it’s time to work a little harder at it – get a little more innovative in marketing and sales to that wine out there in peoples’ hands,” Milbrandt said. “It’s going to take more media contact and more time on the street.”

But that doesn’t deter Milbrandt Vineyards. According to Milbrandt, the United States is one of the largest consumers of wine and that number continues to grow. Not only that but wine production in Washington State continues to grow. Grape production in the state is increasing by five to ten percent a year. Milbrandt does caution those who might be interested in getting involved in the grape and wine business though that it is vitally important to have buyer for your product before you get started.

“We’re going to continue to grow and produce quality wine,” Milbrandt said. “That’s the thing about Washington; it does produce very good wine for the price. It’s pretty hard to beat.”