

Washington State's first Latino winemaker is a prize winner

By JENNIFER LeCLAIRE

Victor Cruz traded in his suit, tie and dress shoes for blue jeans, a plaid shirt and work boots when he retired from Westinghouse to make wine in Washington State.

While Cruz grew up in Wapato, Washington, the son of first-generation Mexican-American farm laborers, he never plowed fields, sowed seed or reaped a harvest. Instead he earned an engineering degree from Western Washington University and began climbing the corporate ladder.

Today, his ladder is up against a different wall. One where patience is more coveted than productivity; where the time-tested process of slowly aging wine is more important than cranking out innovative product designs.

"Engineering provided a great life for me," says Cruz, 45, the first Latino winery owner in the state. "We were fortunate enough to invest well. I had wanted to start a winery for years, and when I retired I got serious about it."

Serious is an understatement. Cruz didn't venture into unknown territory alone. He established Cañon de Sol in Washington's Columbia Valley appellation in 1999 with some expert counsel from Charlie Hoppes, a childhood friend whose reputation as a winemaker extraordinaire was 20 years in the making.

Instant recognition

Cañon de Sol introduced its first wines in 2001 and enjoyed immediate success. The winery's syrah, meritage and merlot, aged to perfection in American and French oak barrels, have won numerous awards, and its 2002 syrah won the 2004 Northwest Wine Summit's best of show, best of type and best of region honors.

But Cruz stresses the fact that his business was not an overnight success. It took years of crushing, capitalizing and crushing some more before he ever even produced his first wine.

"We purchased our land in 1999 and began crushing our first grapes in 2000," Cruz recalls. "We were getting ready for the 2001 crush before our first wines were ready. With no guarantee that the wines would sell, it was definitely a gamble. The biggest challenge is always selling your wine."

But it was a gamble that paid off. Cañon de Sol sells like hotcakes in retail stores and fine dining establishments in the Northwest. Besides hard work, Cruz's success may be attributed to finding a niche in micromanaged monitoring, from vineyard inspection to bottling of the prize-winning varieties.

"We make small quantities of high-end red wine," Cruz explains. "It's very hands-on. The wine doesn't just sit there in barrels for months and months aging. We test them and clean the barrels constantly. It all starts with buying the best grapes."

Dealing with success

Cruz says his biggest challenge now is figuring out how much wine he needs to produce. He wants to keep the operation small because the easygoing vintner enjoys meeting with visitors, organizing wine-tasting events and socializing at winemaking dinners.

But things could change. Cruz says he already feels pressure from restaurants and retailers who want the Cañon de Sol label on hand, and his status as a Hispanic winemaker puts him in a unique position in the marketplace.

Scarborough Wine Research has revealed that 10 percent of wine consumers are Hispanic. Moreover, Hispanic consumers are 96 percent more likely than the average American wine consumer to spend \$20 or more on a bottle of wine.

With 39.9 million Hispanics in the United States and 11 million more expected to arrive by the end of the next decade, winemakers are beginning to pay more attention to this group, which has a disposable income larger—\$653 billion in 2003—than the gross national product of Spain or Mexico.

"In my wildest dreams I never thought using my ethnic background would be a plus for me. But it has been," Cruz says. "It's brought me a lot of marketing opportunities with magazines and newspapers. Still, my advice to any Hispanic entrepreneur would be to get an education. Education opened many doors for me and gave me the opportunity to take a risk in the wine industry."