

BURNT BRIDGE

C E L L A R S

Ben Stuart, Burnt Bridge Cellars Winemaker

Years at Burnt Bridge: 2014-present

Schooling: BA in Business Admin, UofO. Associates degree in Viticulture and Enology from WWCC.

What made you want to make wine?/ What attracted you to

winemaking? Well, I've been a homebrewer since my (very) early 20s - even made beer for my wedding! And I always thought making booze for a living, professionally, would be a good gig with some pretty obvious benefits. But I never really understood how that could be a possible career path, especially within the wine industry, until I stumbled across the amazing program in Walla Walla.

I know this was your second career...what was the thought

process behind that? Any doubts? Actually it's my third or fourth career, I've lost count at this point. The thought process was basically this - after working in sales and marketing and journalism and PR, working in Oregon and Alaska and back in Oregon - I asked myself what I really, really wanted to learn about and what I wanted to do.

And I chose winemaking. And yeah, of course, plenty of doubts. I had to convince my wife to move from our cute little bungalow in Portland with our six-year-old son to Walla Walla, Washington, so that I could enroll in a 2-year Community College program. So yeah, doubts.

What was your “aha” moment with wine? Honestly, I've had so many it's hard to choose. But here are a couple. During school, I remember tasting a Horsepower Syrah that was poured from the owner/winemaker of Cayuse Vineyard, Christophe Baron himself, from an unlabeled bottle before he officially launched the brand. It smelled like horse manure and marijuana and it couldn't have smelled or tasted any better. The other happened just the other day. A longtime friend and his buddies stopped by and we tasted some of the soon-to-be-bottled 2017 wines from Burnt Bridge straight from the barrel. Let's just say they liked them.

How has winemaking changed for you since being here? I think I've just gotten more confident in what we're doing. I've learned to worry a little less and listen to the wine a little more, if that makes sense.

What has surprised you about being a winemaker? Maybe that the term "winemaker" is so nebulous? I don't know. There are people with my same job title who fly around the world in private jets and point at tanks and bark orders for a living. My truck is almost 20 years old and I still hand-bucket grapes from the bins to the press. I still think I'm having more fun, though.

What goals in winemaking are you still working to achieve? Making the perfect bottle of wine, of course!

Hardest challenge you've faced? I don't know. At the end of the day, the hardest challenge I've faced as a winemaker pales in

comparison to the challenges most of our fellow citizens deal with all the time. I know I'm pretty lucky to do what I do.

Favorite wine to drink? What day, time is it? What am I eating? Who am I drinking with? What is the occasion? That, in my opinion, is what is so great about wine. It's beauty is its variability.

What is one of your favorite wine varietals to work with and why? Syrah, because it's so terroir dependent.

Any wine that you would love to make or experiment with that you haven't been able to? I've never actually made a pinot noir. That's on the bucket list for sure.

Favorite and least favorite part of making wine? Favorite - you get out what you put in. Least favorite - sometimes that's not enough.

Favorite drink besides wine? I like beer and bourbon. Sometimes in that order.

Favorite wine region you've visited? It's gotta be Walla Walla, right?

What blend would you love to make? I like blends that don't follow convention. I'm working on one now. Stay tuned!

Who do you admire the most in the wine world? The first lazy person who left his or her fruit out in the sun too long and then put it in a clay pot and had the guts to drink it. That person and the director at the WWCC program Tim Donahue and about 20 other people.

What do you find to be the hardest part of the harvest? It's really just a logistics problem at some point. Especially for those of us who

are 3-4 hours away from the vineyards. The coordination to get the fruit at the right time is a bit of a matrix.

How do you know when it's a good vintage? You get a good idea during harvest, then a better idea during fermentation. Then a better idea after about a year in the barrel and then a better idea a year later. Then at bottling, that's a pretty good indicator. And then release and each year that follows, you learn a little more.

Any winemaking tips for those just getting into winemaking or those interested in studying wine? It's all about the palate. At the end of the day, the most important asset you have is your ability to taste. It's also all about the pallet jack. Learn how to lift heavy objects. And learn how to drive a forklift. And learn to love wet feet and clothes. And be good at math and science. Live and die with the details and also learn how to go with the flow. That's all there is to it!

What is one of the most rewarding things about your job? We get to literally make "aha" moments for other people!