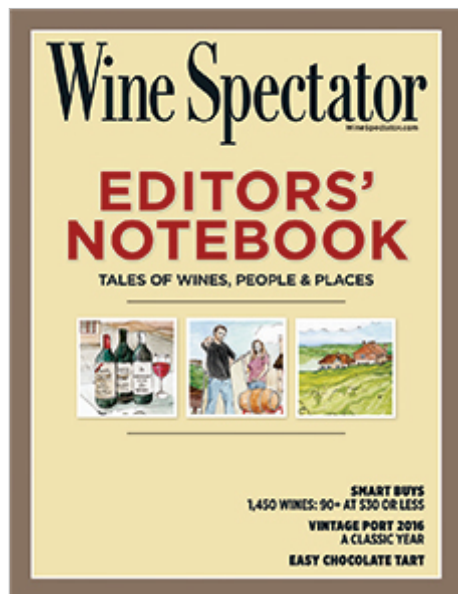


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## Magazine Archives: Jan. 31 - Feb. 28, 2019



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### Winding Road to Washington

*Tim Fish*

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There are winemakers who have good backstories, and then there's Washington's Chris Sparkman. His partner and wife, Kelly, is no slacker in the backstory department either. The Sparkmans' journey raises a question I've often pondered: Do people with compelling lives make compelling wines?

It's certainly true of the Sparkmans. Their wines have flair and personality yet are also refined and built to enjoy with food. What's more, 17 of the 20 Sparkman Cellars wines I've reviewed in the past two years rated 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale.

Washington mainstays Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay make up much of the Woodinville winery's production, but Chris has a taste for the atypical, bottling the likes of Souzão and Touriga Nacional as well. "And of course, no Washington wine portfolio is complete without Graziano," Chris smiles.

For a winery that produced 12,000 cases in 2018, such portfolio diversity is not a trivial undertaking. Chris and Kelly harvest 20 different varieties from 19 vineyards in seven American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in Oregon and Washington.

It was a roundabout path that brought the Sparkmans to winemaking, and to Washington, but an interesting one. Chris, 55, was born in Knoxville, Tenn., and Kelly, 48, came from Memphis; the two met at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville 30 years ago. She was working on a biology degree in wildlife and fish management, while he was studying a little of everything. Inquisitive and restless at heart, Chris seeks out new ideas and challenges.

But the story really begins a decade before. Chris was working as a draftsman for his architect father on designs for the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, and NOLA worked its charm on the young man. "I decided, 'I gotta have me some of this town,'" Chris recalls. He took a sabbatical from U.T., Knoxville, and moved to New Orleans. "I wound up on the doorstep of Commander's Palace and just worked my way up."

Those were the days when Emeril Lagasse ran the kitchen at Commander's, and Chris eventually became a sommelier at the now Grand Award-winning restaurant. That was followed by a stint at Michael's in Santa Monica when the Los Angeles area was reveling in the decadent 1980s, specifically '86 and '87. "I was in my early 20s and I was regularly tasting [Domaine de la Romanée-Conti] and first-growths," Chris says, recalling a coveted taste of the storied 1945 Mouton-Rothschild.

But shortly afterward, Chris found himself back in Knoxville, where he met Kelly, completed his degree in 1988 and worked in local restaurants. "I didn't do much but party there for a while," Chris concedes. And Chris and Kelly were setting off in different directions. Chris served in the Peace Corps for seven months in 1994, teaching agroforestry in Cameroon, while Kelly worked with peregrine falcons in Wyoming.

A master's in International Environmental Policy at Middlebury College followed for Chris in 1998, with the next two years seeing him split his professional life between the front of the house at Todd English's Olives restaurant in Washington, D.C., and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's International Whaling Commission.

Finally, in 2003, Chris settled in the Seattle area, where he worked as general manager and sommelier at the former Waterfront Seafood Grill for eight years. Kelly, whose work and personal travels took her from Alaska to Australia, also moved to Seattle. They married and decided to have a family; today they have two daughters, Stella, 14, and Ruby, 12.

It was Kelly's father, Dick Nauman, who suggested they start a family business. The original plan, Chris says, was to open a wineshop, but a dinner with friend Charles Smith of K Vintners changed everything. A winery, Smith argued, would be "so much cooler." As Chris recalls, "Charles reached for a cocktail napkin and wrote down all the algorithms to run a winery on a dozen napkins."

Of course, Smith left out a few details, Chris recalls, laughing loudly. "We knew just enough to pull it off and not enough to know not to do it."

The 2004 vintage was Sparkman Cellars' debut, with Mark McNeilly of Mark Ryan Winery helping with winemaking through 2006. There were three wines in the first-release vintage: Syrah Red Mountain Stella Mae 2004, Red Mountain Ruby Leigh 2004 and Merlot Red Mountain Valley Outlaw 2004. Since 2010, the winemaker has been Seattle native Linn Scott, whom Chris calls "a bit of a mad scientist."

From the beginning, the Sparkmans had a specific approach to making wine in Washington. "[Achieving] power is not an issue in Washington state, and the acidity is high," Chris says. Tannin management is a top priority in Washington, and Sparkman Cellars is among the most successful at it, mitigating potential hard tannins in the vineyard by controlling the leaf canopy, among other methods. In the cellar, a large percentage of whole cluster is often used to flesh out the tannins, while keeping careful control over fermentations and cold soaks.

"I come from the restaurant sommelier community, so food is central to what we're trying to do," Chris says. "The wines need to be delicious in their youth but they need to be ageworthy, so there's this balance thing."

While the Sparkmans don't own any vineyards, they have been a significant presence in Woodinville, with a winery and tasting room in the Warehouse District and a second tasting room in the Hollywood District.

Just in time for crush 2018, the Sparkmans began transitioning to a new home, crushing grapes at the existing winery but storing barrels in the former Redhook Brewery in Woodinville, a remodeled facility that will also include DeLille Cellars and Teatro ZinZanni (a zany circus dinner theater) when it is completed.

Looking back on the many paths the Sparkmans traveled to get where they are, Chris has few regrets. "This is not a mistake, what we're doing," Chris says. "It has given us the life we hoped for."

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