

Wine Spectator

ONE COUPLE'S JOURNEY FROM VIRTUAL REALITY TO THE VINEYARD

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It's not uncommon for people to cultivate their love of wine on the Internet, but it's rare to make the move from the computer to the vineyard. Russell Bevan and his fiancée, Victoria DeCrescenzo, may just be the first couple to go from being wine web geeks to winemakers.

Bevan, who just turned 40, insists this isn't an early mid-life crisis. After all, he is a fourth-generation Sonoma, and in his mind's eye, he's returned home to wine country with a new purpose.

Ten years ago, Bevan lived in Minneapolis, where he worked for a dental products company. He met DeCrescenzo, now 44, a dental hygienist who was fine-tuning her palate taking wine appreciation classes.

Soon they were dating and sharing their wine experiences. Then the almighty grape took hold of their lives, sapping more of their time and money, but widening their circle of friends as they met other wine lovers via Internet wine forums.

From there, Bevan ramped up his interest in wine. For a year he wrote a wine column for the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He and DeCrescenzo organized regular jaunts through Napa and Sonoma, accompanied by their new Internet friends. On one sojourn a few years ago, I joined them for dinner in St. Helena, after they and a group of about 25 wine lovers had completed a full day of tours and tastings at various Napa wineries.

A couple of years ago, Bevan transferred back to California, and he and DeCrescenzo eventually settled in the small town of Windsor, in northern Sonoma County, where he planted his first 10 grapevines—in his front yard.

The wine bug continued to nibble away, and in 2004 they found a small property in Bennett Valley, north of Sonoma

Valley, which is suitable for a small vineyard. At an elevation of 1,100 feet, it's a cool-climate site, and plans are underway to plant Syrah.

It turned out that some of the "wine geeks" Bevan had met on the Internet weren't nerds at all. "Some of these 'geeks' are high-powered professionals," he said, and some of them counseled him on ways to get into the wine business.

Their wine country tours had put them in contact with Carole Meredith and Steve Lagier, of Lagier Meredith Vineyard, a Syrah specialist on Mount Veeder, and with Jim and Barbara Richards, proprietors of Paloma, the reigning king of California Merlot.

Other acquaintances are the seasoned winemaker Philip Togni, of Togni Vineyards, on Spring Mountain, along with Greg LaFollette, an up-and-coming winemaker based in Sonoma. Bevan has tapped the expertise of each of these mentors as his budding winemaking career transitions from theory to reality.

Last fall, Bevan Cellars crushed its first Cabernet from Showket Vineyard, a well-known Oakville vineyard that also produces wine under its own label. Bevan and DeCrescenzo invited 15 friends to help sort and crush the grapes. He filled his car with his finest wines, figuring they'd wrap up the work by noon and celebrate in style.

He was off by about 10 hours. It took 15 people 12 hours to sort through a ton of grapes, Bevan recalled, and for their celebration they dined on take-out pizza. By 10:30 p.m., they were all exhausted, and they called it quits for the day. They eventually crushed enough grapes to make 200 cases. Next year they're hoping to make 1,000, including a small amount of Sonoma Syrah, while they finalize plans to plant their property.

The long-range plans for Bevan Cellars call for DeCrescenzo, the "worker bee," to quit her day job in five years and work for the winery full-time. For now, Bevan plans to keep his job, too, though at some point he hopes he can devote all his energy to their business.

Their long-postponed wedding plans are also back on track, Bevan said, meaning they'll have plenty of reasons to celebrate their new venture. They're taking a big risk pouring their money—and their souls—into wine, but they are following their hearts.