Williams continues to make history at Brooks Wines

By Eric Degerman on January 7, 2016

AMITY, Ore. — Chris Williams has established himself as one of the Pacific Northwest’s top producers of Riesling at Brooks Wines, but his calling as a winemaker in Oregon’s Eola-Amity Hills began with a phone call about an Italian motorcycle. So started his relationship with the late Jimi Brooks that continues to lead Williams on a remarkable ride.

“I was selling Moto Guzzi parts and had an ad in the paper, and Jimi had an old Moto Guzzi he was looking for some stuff for,” Williams said with a smile. “It sparked a conversation, and we talked quite a bit that night. Then we just kind of kept in contact over the next couple of weeks.”

Brooks soon talked Williams into helping pour some wine at special events, and Williams’ life changed forever.
“You know, everybody is really happy, they’re having a good time, there’s good food, drinking and enjoying themselves,” Williams remembered. “What’s not to like about it?”

This fall, we visited with Williams on the porch of the farmhouse near the new tasting room at Brooks. Here’s the interview: Click here to watch

**Turning tragedy into triumph at Brooks Wine**

Sadly, Williams lost his linebacker-sized mentor suddenly and unexpectedly. Brooks died of an aortic aneurism at the age of 38 on the eve of the 2004 crush. What happened next might be the most heart-rending story in the history of Oregon wine, and it became the centerpiece for the 2014 award-winning documentary *American Wine Story*.

A dozen Willamette Valley winemakers honored their friend by taking in the fruit for Brooks and making those 2004 wines. They urged Jimi’s sister in California — Janie Brooks Heuck — to manage the winery on behalf of her nephew, Pascal. Officially, Jimi’s 8-year-old son became the youngest winery owner in the United States. Pascal’s aunt continues in the role of managing director.

In 2005, Brooks-Heuck hired Williams to handle the winemaking at Brooks, and the door is open should Jimi’s son choose to take over his father’s winery. Pascal, who grew up in Pennsylvania, now is a sophomore at the University of California-Santa Cruz, where he’s taking some agriculture classes. He spent time working the 2015 harvest alongside Williams at Brooks.

“Janie is somebody I didn’t really know very well when Jimi passed away, so it took some time to me to start to learn her and a form a relationship with her,” said the soft-spoken Williams. “But she’s very easy to talk to, great to get along with and very open to try things even though she wasn’t overly familiar with them especially with the wine industry. It became a very good relationship very quickly, and something I felt very comfortable in.

“And then to be able to have Pascal be a part of it — if he wants to or not — has always been very important, too,” Williams continued. “It’s always been one of those where, yes, he is the owner but he’s never, never been put under the pressure or under the understanding that he’s ever going to have to do anything with it if he doesn’t want to someday.”

A decade later, Williams makes 15,000 cases of wine and continues in a role which has him feeling as if he’s the “luckiest person on Earth.”

“I definitely feel very honored and very lucky to be here and to have a place like this to be able to share it with people,” Williams said.
A passion for Riesling

Brooks Wines offers more than a dozen expressions of Riesling, and most of them are single-vineyard projects. (Photo by Andréa Johnson Photography/courtesy of Brooks Wines)

Among the features in the new winery and tasting room are barrel pieces that list the names of the Willamette Valley winemakers who stepped up to make wine for Brooks from the 11 vineyards he’d contracted with for the 2004 vintage: Bergström, J.K. Carriere, Chehalem Wines, J. Christopher, Cristom, Patricia Green Cellars, Maysara, Ponzi, Ransom, Rex Hill, Solena Estates and Westery.

They rank among the state’s premier producers of Pinot Noir, but Williams also has continued Jimi’s passion for Riesling. Williams worked for Brooks at Maysara and WillaKenzie, so he had the sense for the direction and risks Jimi might take with Riesling.

“Jimi’s style was not necessarily one particular thing,” Williams said. “It was about trying new things and trying to go in a direction that he felt comfortable making the wines. And so I think that’s the style that I’ve continued – to be comfortable making the wines that I’m making. Now, some of the wines fall into category more of an Alsace-style and some fall into something that may be much more German or maybe reminds you of Mosel. There’s not necessarily one direction for all the wines but having a wide variety of different directions.”

That exploration serves as a hook for his wine club members. “We’re trying to educate people on how differences in clonal material and site will make a difference in the way the wine turns out,” Williams said. “We bought from 13 vineyards in 2015, so we’re going to try to continue to do as many different single vineyards as I feel show varietal characteristic and show a site characteristic.”
An international audience for Riesling

That thirst for Riesling puts Brooks in the same discussion as the likes of Chehalem Wines and Trisaetum, and it also has Williams on the radar of author Stuart Pigott, arguably the planet’s foremost expert on Riesling.

“It’s the one thing I like to drink no matter how I feel,” Williams said. “There’s always a Riesling for the mood and making it is really fun. It’s challenging and yet exciting to see the differences between all the different vineyards and between the different clonal materials and how they’re going to change from year to year. I love to make reds. I love to make Pinot, but Riesling is just really fun.”

This summer, Williams again will be representing Brooks and present some of the region’s best examples of the noble German grape in Seattle at the Riesling Rendezvous, the annual international celebration that Chateau Ste. Michelle plays host to every three years.

“Janie gives me the forum and the opportunity to do kind of whatever I want,” Williams said. “It allows me to experiment and have fun with it and never have a lot of pressure behind it.”
Education with a sense of flair

Jess Pierce purchased Brooks Wines for restaurants in Portland and worked Riesling harvests in Germany before heading up education and communications for the Eola-Amity Hills property in 2014. (Photo by Andréa Johnson Photography/courtesy of Brooks Wines)

Jess Pierce, director of wine education and communications for Brooks, explained why the winery on Cherry Blossom Lane continues to make a name for itself internationally with Riesling.

“When you are looking at that amount of Riesling in this state, it accounts for 3 percent of the vines, so there’s not much of it — much less old vine fruit,” said Pierce, who has worked two harvests in Germany. “We’re lucky because of all of Jimi’s connections when he was here and working with all these sites and meeting these farmers, we get a lot of old vine fruit that has so much complexity and depth.

“People come to us because they know we’ll do a good job with it and it won’t just go into a Willamette Valley Riesling” she added. “Almost everybody makes a Riesling now that’s Willamette Valley, and it’s a mix of things they’ve pieced together, but we get to work with all these amazing sites and buy enough that we’re able to do single bottlings.”

There’s also a special collaborative project among Brooks, Chehalem and Trisaetum. “It started a couple of years ago, so we’re going on our third year of doing it,” Williams said. “Basically, we all exchange a drum of juice each from each of our estate vineyards, so the opportunity is that you can see fruit from three different soil types and also within the three different winemakers.”

Those nine wines are unlikely to make it beyond their wine clubs. “It would be something fun to lay down,” Williams said. “It is interesting and not everybody is a geek that way with Riesling, but for an opportunity to be able to look at something and really see the differences between what you’re playing with and also who’s playing with it, it’s fun.
Going beyond Riesling

The hillside below the new tasting room features Brooks Estate Vineyard, a biodynamically farmed site influenced by the afternoon breeze that cruises through the Van Duzer Corridor. Established in 1973 as Eola Hills Vineyard, it’s dominated by Riesling and Pinot Noir. Farther down the hill is the young Muska Vineyard and Crannell Vineyard.

“We call them the Rosé Twins because it’s the 60/40 Crannell/Muska vineyards that we use for our rosé,” Pierce said. “These are two of the cutest old farmers, and they are both up here every afternoon having a glass of wine. We buy virtually all of their fruit, so we have almost a 65-acre parcel that we’re pulling fruit from – even though only 20 acres is ours.”

Crannell produced stunning Pinot Noir for Myron Redford when he owned iconic Amity Vineyard, and Brooks recently signed a 10-year contract with Crannell to lock up not only the Pinot Noir and Gamay but also the Pinot Blanc. And while Williams’ focus is on the North Willamette Valley, the Columbia Gorge continues to fascinate him and allowed him to launch his special Terue project from young York Hill Vineyard near Hood River.

“Technically, it’s still a Brooks label, but it’s just something that I got to put my own label on and tear away as a name for it, and I do the dry Muscat from there, too,” Williams said. “It was fun. One of my favorite producers in the region is Patrick Reuter from...
Dominio. He grew up in the Gorge and does a lot of different wines from the Gorge area, and I just always really enjoyed his Gorge Pinots. So when I had the opportunity to kind of start doing that, it was something I definitely wanted to pick up on — much like the Oakridge Gewürztraminer. The Gorge is a special spot. It hasn’t quite got the recognition that the Willamette Valley has got yet, but it’s coming.”

From memorial service to winery home

Janie Brooks-Heuck stands on the balcony of the new tasting room at Brooks Wines with her nephew, Pascal Brooks. (Photo by Andréa Johnson Photography/courtesy of Brooks Wines)

The history and synergy between the winery and Don Byard stems from the early days of Brooks.

“Don and Jimi had become really good friends,” Pierce said. “Jimi was farming this site, and Don had three daughters, and none of them were interested in either becoming a winemaker or tending a vineyard, so they had a handshake agreement that Don would sell the vineyard to Jimi when it came time to retire.

“Jimi passed in 2004, and Don hadn’t retired yet, but in 2008 he called Janie and Chris,” Pierce continued. “The day they came out to meet with Don and were standing in the vineyard — which is where Jimi’s funeral was — the woman who lived in the house
nearby walked out to the street and starts nailing in a ‘for sale’ sign.”

It wasn’t until 2014 when the 5-acre site became the new winery facility, while that woman’s farmhouse has transitioned to a charming cottage used by winery interns and members of the wine industry. There’s the belief that at least someone in the family will sink deeper roots among the vines and within a stone’s throw from the winery.

Despite graduating from Arizona State University with an accounting degree and living near Monterey Bay, Brooks-Heuck remains devoted to Brooks Wines and has become a beloved member of the Oregon wine industry. The health care industry executive and mother of two has studied viticulture and enology at University of California-Davis and sits on the board of directors for Wine America and the International Riesling Foundation. She also helps organize the International Pinot Noir Conference.

“She’s definitely a native Oregonian, so I can see her back in Oregon someday,” Williams said.

Pierce, who gave up a career as a restaurant manager/wine buyer in Portland before joining Brooks in 2014, also is convinced her boss will return from Pebble Beach, Calif., in a few years.

“Janie owns the house now, and she stays out here in the summer, as does Pascal,” Pierce said. “I’ll bet you anything that when her kids graduate from high school, the family will be up here the next week.”

A gathering place for Jimi

Brooks Wines opened its new tasting room in 2014 along Cherry Lane Road in Amity, Ore. (Photo by Andréa Johnson Photography/courtesy of Brooks Wines)

Few of those who visit the winery have a sense of the history that surrounds the property. Don and Carolyn Byard established the vineyard when there were just nine
wineries in Oregon and later joined the industry as Hidden Springs Winery. By 1993, they sold the production facility — but not their vines — to Gino Cuneo. In 2001, Sam Tannehill and Cheryl Francis took over. Their friend from Portland, Jimi Brooks, had launched his own brand three years earlier.

And now with the friendly and nicely appointed tasting room, there’s a sense of fellowship that would make Jimi smile. He’d also appreciate the use of the “Rasta bar” from his old facility, which now can easily accommodate the 170 folks who come from Portland and Salem on Friday afternoons for pizza in summer and paella during the cooler months.

“We have a goal, and that’s to share our story and share our wines with everybody,” Williams said, “so to be able to build a place where people actually come and seek you out as a gathering place – as a place to meet up with friends, as a place to just hang out – that’s what Jimi always liked to do.

“His big thing was to have that gathering spot, which was his house, and I feel that we’ve kind of accomplished that in the building,” Williams added. “It’s fun to have a place that people enjoy coming to.”

About Eric Degerman
Eric Degerman is the president and CEO of Great Northwest Wine. He is a journalist with more than 30 years of daily newspaper experience and has been writing about wine since 1998. He co-founded Wine Press Northwest with Andy Perdue and served as its managing editor for 15 years. He is a frequent wine judge along the West Coast and contributor to Pacific Northwest Golfer magazine, the region's longest-running golf publication.

http://www.greatnorthwestwine.com/2016/01/07/williams-continues-to-make-history-at-brooks-wines/