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World-Class Winemaker

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World-class winemaker

A single semester was all it took to plant deep roots at Linfield.



One semester.

In the spring of 1995 – before the family business, the impeccable reputation or leadership of the world’s most exclusive wine – a young Bertrand de Villaine spent a semester as an

exchange student at Linfield College.

The experience stayed with him.

Now, as manager of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC), he helps produce wine widely considered to be among the world’s best. The 2005 Romanée-Conti, for example, recently sold for \$20,000 per bottle.

Regardless of price, de Villaine wants the wines to be enjoyed by consumers, rather than collected by investors.

“The real value of a bottle can only be discussed when it’s opened and tasted,” he says. “This is part of our strong beliefs.”

Through it all, his connection to Linfield remains. De Villaine returns to Oregon (and to Linfield) yearly.

One day during his most recent visit, De Villaine pulls his 1995 Linfield student ID card from his wallet and smiles. Amid Linfield stories, the prominent winemaker shares advice for wine making – and life.

DRC and the de Villaine name are revered around the world, beginning with the very ground upon which the vineyards flourish in the Burgundy region of France. Some 900 years ago, Benedictine monks from the Abbaye de Saint-Vivant walled off the property and planted vines, which to this day are managed biodynamically and without pesticides.

“We have harvest notes from my ancestors that help us to

keep the link with the past. If we want to know where to go, we have to understand where we are coming from,” de Villaine says.

“Since ever, things are changing. The wine is changing. The taste of the consumer is changing. Responding to the changing climatic conditions is our challenge,” adds de Villaine, who was a business student in the mid-1990s when he first joined friends already on exchange at Linfield. “Every vintage we are changing and adapting. Every vintage is a new story.”

After his semester in Oregon, de Villaine returned to France to finish his business degree and focus on international trading in wine and spirits at the CFPPA in Beaune, (Centre de Formation Professionnelle et de Promotion Agricole). Ultimately, he completed the Technician In Oenology program at the Jules Guyot Institute (I.U.V.V) at the University of Dijon in France. Now a father of five, he says with a smile that his oldest son, 13, already has a Linfield application for admission.

In the Willamette Valley as well as in Burgundy, he says, excellent vineyards are the foundation to excellent wine. He encourages aspiring winemakers to become one with their soil, and the idiosyncrasies of their vineyards.

He also advises students and young winemakers to be open-minded and forward-thinking.

And, just maybe, not to take themselves too seriously – no matter how much their wine might cost.

“Never be worried, but always be aware,” he says. “We are not working with something that will change the world. I’m just a winemaker who wants to keep alive and transfer this patrimony to the next generation, that’s all.”

– Laura Davis