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Smaller is Better • by Joe Pollack

Sometimes, smaller really is better.

A long time ago, Anheuser-Busch made one of its rare unwise business decisions. It decided to go into the wine business and, overburdened with advice from many wine experts, some real and some self-proclaimed, it went to work. A great deal of money was spent. The experiment failed.

Less than a decade ago, Ray Goff retired from Anheuser-Busch, where he had worked for 30 years. Among his many positions was one as a buyer of hops, which led him to the Yakima Valley of central Washington, where miles of hops plants, tall, shaggy and ungainly, line the highways. They are some of the nation's best. Goff became friends with Mike Hogue, a hops grower and a wine maker. Goff's A-B career reached a climax when he led a team to

China to buy and rebuild a brewery, A-B's first in mainland China and the beginning of a distribution network and sales organization for Budweiser in China. Then he moved to Walla, Walla, Wash., and went into the wine business. His project succeeded.

Goff, gray-haired and wiry, was in St. Louis the other day, pouring wines from his Pepper Bridge Winery and Amavi Cellars (pronounced with the accent on the first syllable), both located in Walla Walla and producing wines from the Walla Walla Valley of eastern Washington.

Even before being known for its wines, Walla Walla was a source of humor from its name alone, but it reached its greatest fame in a Danny Kaye song, "Triplets," which had the couplet, "Every summer we went away to Baden Baden Baden; every winter we went back home to Walla Walla Walla." Kaye sang it in many nightclub acts, and it was used in a wonderful 1953 MGM musical, "The Band Wagon," sung by Jack Buchanan, Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray, in baby costumes and on their knees.

Enough digression:

Pepper Bridge was named for an old military road which ran from Fort Walla Walla to a post at The Dalles, in what is now Oregon, and forded the Walla Walla River just south of a farm owned by a family named Pepper. Goff has three vineyards, growing Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, all classic Bordeaux varietals. Smaller amounts of Syrah, Sémillon, Sangiovese and Grand Vidure vines are planted as well. Winemaker Jean-Francois Pellet, a third generation grower and enologist born and trained in Switzerland, a veteran of wineries in Spain and Germany, and most recently formerly an assistant to Joe Heitz at his eponymous – and great – winery, is responsible for the excellent cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah and sémillon.

Pellet also makes the wines at Amavi, a combination of the Latin "am" for love (as in "amor"), and "vi" for life (as in "vida"). Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon are produced, along with a lesser amount of Sémillon, sold only at the winery.

Goff brought some of the latter, and I found it more to my liking than most sémillons, which I find suffering from flabby qualities. There were hints of honeysuckle and good depth to the wine, but still slightly soft.

The reds were far better to my taste, and Goff brought two from each winery, a 2002 merlot from (about \$45 retail) and an '01 cabernet sauvignon (\$50) from Pepper Bridge, an '02 syrah and an '01 cabernet sauvignon from Amavi (each \$25).

The Pepper Bridge cab was a standout, dark and rich, with a lot of spice and overtones of red currant and blackberry on the palate. There is considerable backbone and structure to the wine, and some hints of tannin, but the wine is ready to drink. With a wine that well-aged in only four years, it will be interesting to see how long it lasts, but I'd guess it will improve for another five years and hold for five after that. It's 98 percent cab, 2 percent merlot, which adds a little softness, but this wine is a splendid example of cabernet sauvignon.

The merlot, a blend of 89 percent merlot, 7 percent cabernet sauvignon and 4 percent malbec, is a lovely wine, round as a perfect pearl, soft and still rich. Wonderful color, lots of fruit and a long, slow finish. Once again, there might be a question of how long it will last, but I think it will be long enough.

The Amavi wines are led by the syrah, a little richer than its Australian cousins with earthy tones, blackberry flavors and considerable complexity. It's 100 percent syrah, but 20 percent of it is aged in Hungarian oak, while the Pepper Bridge wines are aged

in French and American oak, which is more expensive. The cabernet sauvignon is 87 percent cab, 7 percent merlot, 4 percent syrah and 2 percent malbec, the latter adding a little earthiness. There is good complexity and a happy balance of dark fruit flavors and some spice.