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“THE RED HORSE”
Eric Dunham’s first large canvas was the first artist series label, appearing on the 1999 Lewis Vineyard Syrah.



COURTESY OF DUNHAM CELLARS

ERIC DUNHAM DRAWS ON OTHER CREATIVE TALENTS TO MAKE LABELS OF DISTINCTION

GREAT WINEMAKERS, as with any artists, must have a muse. A great winemaker who is also an artist/painter must have one helluva good one, I’m thinking.

“Who is your muse?” I ask Eric Dunham.

He pauses thoughtfully in mid-pour before answering. We are seated at the long wooden dining table in his winery, tasting the newly released 2003 Dunham Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon IX. The room is filled with dozens of square, one-ton stainless bins, in which the 2006 vintage has been fermenting. Dion DiMucci is blasting through the speakers; “Runaround Sue” still running around after all these years.



“COME OUT AND PLAY”

“One flower is locked behind a door having violin lessons,” Eric Dunham explains, “and the others are out in the rain and having fun. Pretty simple, really.”



“BLUE ANGEL”

Dunham says this painting is “a choppy story that creates questions; a trillium flower and an angel. I’m trying to evoke the question.”



“THE BLUE HORSE”

Another of Dunham’s favorite works became the label for the 2002 Lewis Vineyard Syrah.

The wine, as with past releases, is pure cabernet, an artful blend of grapes from cool and warm sites. Sappy, supple and silky, it coats the palate and saturates the tongue with blackberries and cherries. The oak is well-integrated, lending sweet caramel notes and a lick of licorice and mocha. Wine-making is a craft, but blending cabernet from a disparate mix of sites to create a truly complete finished wine is an art. Eric Dunham does it as well as anyone in Washington.

But there is a different art much in evidence on this late fall afternoon. The rough walls of the winery are hung with Eric Dunham paintings, brightly colored oils and acrylics, boldly and unself-consciously rendered. Dunham’s most limited wine releases — his single vineyard syrahs and merlots and cabernets — sport many of these same paintings as artist’s labels.

“I am looking for muses every day,” he answers slowly. “Part of that is finding yourself. I have a luxury, too; painting isn’t my business. This isn’t my moneymaker.”

“What I’m trying to achieve,” he continues, “is an absolute release on canvas. Art for me is just such a release, and it combines with my winemaking and lifestyle and everything I love.”

As with his winemaking, his cooking and other pursuits, Dunham’s painting skills are self-taught. Highly social, he turns everything into a party. Painting, he admits, is “really hard to do on your own.” It is the social aspect, the Bohemian aspect as he calls it, that he loves.


His first large canvas, titled “The Red Horse,” came about after a dinner with friends at the winery a decade ago. It was finished in a single day and remains his favorite work. Why the horse? “No idea,” he replies. “I just started drawing and filling in and it became a

horse.” This was the first artist series label, appearing on the 1999 Lewis Vineyard Syrah. Another favorite work, “The Blue Horse,” became the label for the 2002 Lewis.

“What I don’t like about wine and art,” Dunham admits, “is selling it. The unveiling and the criticism is the hardest part. What I’ve slowly realized is that I don’t do it for anybody else. It’s whatever develops that evening and paints a story over time.”

His brightly rendered animals, clouds, flowers and abstracts may not speak to art sophisticates, but they have not gone unnoticed outside the world of wine. And they do sell briskly, most often for charity. At a recent Walla Walla fundraiser for the arts, one of his paintings was the centerpiece of a lot that brought more than \$13,000. In another art, wine and charity venture, Dunham is making special, limited-edition sets of wines with artist labels by Dale Chihuly. Chihuly staffer Billy O’Neill heads up the project (www.billyowines.com), which donates all proceeds to designated charities.

The wines are sold in three-bottle wooden cases. “Mazie,” a chardonnay produced from Lewis Vineyard grapes, benefits the Moyer Foundation’s Camp Erin. Sales of “Mighty,” a syrah, help fund Seniors Making Art, which provides art programs at senior centers throughout Washington. The third wine offered annually is named “Martin,” a cabernet whose proceeds go to Providence Health System’s Senior and Community Services.

For information on upcoming events and future releases, contact Billy O Wines at 206-577-0411. 

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