

2023 MTGWA Major Presenters, March 9-10 Helena



Tom Plocher has been involved in cold climate viticulture in Minnesota since 1980. He is well known for co-authoring (with Bob Parke) the book *Northern Winework: Growing Grapes and Making Wine in Cold Climates*. Since 1996, Tom also has pursued his own grape breeding program, concentrating on new grape varieties for red wine. His varieties, Petite Pearl, Crimson Pearl, and Verona, are commercially-grown in 25 states and in 4 provinces of Canada. Through his company, Plocher-Vines LLC, Tom continues his breeding work, focusing on vine sustainability issues created by climate change and on varieties for dry white wine.



Dr. Andrej Svyantek graduated from NDSU with a PhD a couple years ago and worked there all through his graduate studies with the Grape Germplasm project seeking to develop new super hardy grapes for the northern plains. Last year, Dr. Zach Miller of MSU WARC stole Andrej and his wife Dr. Zhuoyu “Joy” Wang as new faculty for WARC. Andrej and Joy have been a great addition to the WARC team both in the field and in the lab where they can convert our wine samples to useful data for understanding best winemaking practices.



University of Minnesota Enology Specialist Drew Horton will present a talk on “Practical Strategies for High-Acidity Winemaking”, which will cover the broad theories and techniques of making balanced wines in various styles appropriate for cold hardy hybrid grapes. Drew has been active in the wine world for over 20 years, first as a salesman, then cellar rat and then as a winemaker since 2004. After 5 years at Chankaska Creek Winery in Minnesota, Drew turned to research winemaking.

Horton says, “I’m a hands-on winemaker, always looking for the best practical solutions to solve wine and winery needs and issues.”



Roxann McGuire is a 4th generation Montanan, born in Glasgow to a family history in the ranching and packing plant industries. Discovering wine as a consumer, she began to study it, and found a new career path. Her education began with a B.S. in Viticulture/Enology from Washington State University, including an 8 week study abroad in the wine regions of Italy, France and Spain, followed by internships in Argentina and Washington. Roxann, with her husband Brian, developed Willow Mountain Estate Vineyard/Winery, a 20 acre vineyard with a commercial winery in Corvallis, Montana. To date, Roxann has developed a 100% Montana grown Marquette, a red vineyard blend, a white vineyard blend, and a Traditional Champenoise sparkling wine, under the Willow Mountain Winery label. Roxann will be presenting methods and techniques she has employed in making those premium Montana wines.



Alicia Hamm joined the MT Department of Agriculture in 2020 as a marketing and business developer to enhance Montana’s ag industry, which includes grants, US and foreign trade, producer training and more to assist organizations to support Montana’s growers. She will speak to us on marketing Montana Wine Country. She will highlight Eat/Drink Local as well as promoting Montana in the boutique industry as they relate to a growing Montana grown vineyard and winery industry.



Alyssa Griffith, along with her husband, Ben Griffith are both dedicated medical professionals; Ben, a Paramedic and Alyssa, a Registered Nurse. They planted their vineyard in 2017 on the Flathead River near Dixon, MT and became licensed as Watchdog Winery two years ago. They have two children, ages three and five and their faithful German Shepherd who watches over everything. They attended the 2022 VitiNord Conference and Alyssa will report on her time there. They have both served on the MTGWA Board of Directors.



Pedro Vargas grew up in a small ag town in California, became an electronics engineer for many years, then switched gears and went to UC Davis and earned a degree in winemaking. After first small and then larger clients, he established Vino Vargas with his sommelier wife Vicky in Paso Robles. Pedro authored “Stars in a glass” on Methode Champenois, now in its second edition. Thanks to Roxann and Brian McGuire for convincing him to come visit us!



After 40+ years as an amateur winemaker, Bob Thaden started Tongue River Winery 13 years ago along with his wife, Marilyn and son, Josh. Their commitment from the beginning was to make no wine that would not grow in Montana. They own a 3-acre vineyard, and produce about a thousand cases each year, including hybrid grape wines and fruit wines. Bob has been a board member of the ND Grape and Wine Association and the MTGWA since its inception and is the outgoing president of MTGWA.



Damian Sanz is a recent graduate of the National Technology University at Mendoza, Argentina with a B.S. in Enology. He served as a student intern at Tongue River Winery from July through December in 2022 and is back for a year with Tongue River. Damian has interned in Chile, Argentina and California before coming to Montana to learn English better and have his first experience with hybrid grapes and fruit winemaking. Damian and Bob designed the research projects this year at Tongue River Winery.



Christy Clark, Director of the Montana Department of Agriculture, is committed to strengthening Montana’s number one industry and expanding value-added opportunities for producers and businesses. A Choteau native and 5th generation Rancher, Ms. Clark has been deputy director, ag sciences administrator and ag development and marketing bureau chief. She served three terms in the Montana House of Representatives before following her passion for agriculture. She graduated from California State University, Sacramento and raised three children on the family ranch with her husband.



Martin Richard, born in the Deep South. Old enough to pre-date Susan Wrap. Studied wine since the early ‘70s. My wine list for beggar’s banquet in E Lansing Michigan was all-California in 1973 and was reviewed in the New York Times. Wrote the wine column for newspapers in Baton Rouge in the ‘80s. Circumnavigated the United States in a Miata in 1991, fell in love with Glacier National Park, moved permanently to Montana by 1998, to Helena by 2006. Opened Martin’s Wines in 2014. Not yet dead.



Larry and his wife Cindy started Flathead Lake Winery in Polson, MT in 2017. Larry has made wine for 50+ years. Larry recently retired from the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service after 36+ years, the last 15 specializing in orchards and vineyards in Montana. He is a founding member of the MT Grape and Wine Association established in 2014 and established the Winery Association of Montana (WAM) to help promote the Montana grown wine industry. He serves as president of WAM and is leading efforts to establish farm wineries in Montana.



Toby McCracken is our keynote speaker for our banquet Thursday night. Trained at the Culinary Institute of America, Toby has a love affair with all things edible, and delights in pairing food to wines and also with beers, which is fortunate since he is the chef at Bitterroot Brewing in Hamilton, MT. Toby will help us understand that magic that happens between food and wine!