

TASTING  
ROOM

KEELER ESTATE VINEYARD



# The Soul of a Vineyard

by Melissa Wagoner

**G**abriele Keeler is a small woman with a grandmotherly smile who welcomes guests into her tasting room with an open-armed hug. She immediately makes visitors feel at home and at ease.

"I want them to come through that gate and just replenish their soul," she says with a smile crinkling the corners of her eyes, "and I want them to enjoy my wines, too."



*Craig and Gabriele Keeler with their vineyard dog Tasha.*



Photo by Melissa Wagoner

*Craig Keeler in the barrel room.*

Once seated in the cozy tasting room built in the middle of the impressive 200-acre plantation that is Keeler Estate Vineyard, Gabriele shows that beyond her soft exterior is one very adventurous and tough lady.

Born in Bremen, Germany, during World War II, Gabriele dreamed of travelling and of the adventures she would have once she was old enough to strike out on her own.

"I never wanted to get stuck in one town for the rest of my life," she says. "I wanted to kind of get out in the world."

After finishing school, she got the chance she longed for when she became an au pair in Eugene, Oregon.

The children's father was of Jewish-German descent and a professional flautist. On tour with an orchestra in Brazil when the war began, he stayed and married an American woman but his heart was always in Germany and he wanted his children raised German too.

"He wanted to make sure his children learned German customs," Gabriele says. "This opportunity totally changed my life."

It was while living in Eugene that Gabriele met her future husband, Craig Keeler. He was interested in settling down but she still had some adventuring to do.

"It was the American way to get married and have kids and I said, 'No, no, no! Not interested,'" she remembers.

Instead, she signed on with Pan-America and moved first to Miami, then to New York and South America.

"I had the best time travelling for a girl who grew up in a third-floor apartment in Bremen, Germany," she says.

Finally, ready to settle down, she returned to Eugene and Craig. "I said, 'If you want to still get married, let's do it,'" she says. He accepted her offer and they were married in 1967.

Gabriele's adventures didn't end there, however. In 1989, looking to start a new chapter, they stumbled upon a piece of land on a hillside in Amity, Oregon. Despite its being overgrown and in need of some TLC, Gabriele could see its potential.

"We'd established a taste in wine and were really interested in it," she says. "There were a lot of things I didn't care to do, but this one was really cool."

With the help of employees Andres and Manuel Ibarra, the Keelers put in 40 acres of vines and a 100-foot-long compost pile and began renovating the barns and outbuildings.

Eventually, what originally had been land overrun with blackberries, plagued with drainage issues and dotted with dilapidated buildings became a pristine oasis. Rolling hills are crosshatched with neat rows of trellised grapevines. Meandering streams efficiently move water from the hilltops into a series of ponds that naturally process the vineyard's waste water. The outbuildings are tastefully and elegantly decorated tasting rooms, barrel rooms and processing plants. It is a sight to make the most industrious gardener feel lazy.

There is also life everywhere: in the compost and soil, in the apiary and ponds, in the air and waddling through the grass thanks to a partnership with Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center. “They take injured animals, rehabilitate those animals and release them in their natural habitat,” Gabriele says. “We asked them for no deer or raccoons, but we take just about everything else.” Owls, hawks and ducks are prolific around the property, and their presence naturally keeps down the population of mice and voles.

“We are connected with nature on our property,” Gabriele says. In fact, this connection is the very foundation upon which every aspect of Keeler Estate Vineyard is built. A certified organic and biodynamic vineyard, Keeler Estate is dependent upon the health and diversity of its plant and animal inhabitants.

“Biodynamics is the first really sustainable program,” Craig says. “No off-farm inputs.”

Becoming a certified organic farm can be tricky, and there are many hoops that winemakers must jump through: demonstrating that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity and using only approved substances are a few of these. Add to that “the creation and management of a closed system minimally dependent on imported materials,” according to the Demeter biodynamic website, and that “instead meets its needs from the living dynamics of the farm itself.” In a nutshell — a closed circuit way of farming, what is produced on the farm is reused on the farm, the ultimate in sustainability.

Because the Keelers do not have any farm animals — “We aren’t interested in having four-legged animals around here besides the dog,” Gabriele says — they have had to get creative in order to come up with the 27 truckloads of manure that they use in their compost pile every year.

“It’s going to increase,” Craig says, “and it has to be lactating cows, organically fed. They say, ‘Well, you can eat them. I don’t want to eat them.’”

Instead the Keelers have been allowed to utilize manure from a local certified organic dairy, but nearly everything else comes from the farm. “We save everything,” Craig says. “We’re very proud of our compost piles,” Gabriele adds.

Neither Gabriele nor Craig has any background in farming. “I’m probably the biggest city slicker you can imagine,” Gabriele says. “It shows that people can adapt.”

In order to learn the skills he would need to make their venture successful, Craig has taken numerous soil classes at Chemeketa Community College in Salem. He also spends time researching and talking to other vineyard owners, but it has been difficult because a lot of the information about soil health and farming does not look kindly on biodynamic methods.

“In the viticulture classes they make jokes about it,” he says, “but it’s whatever you want to be involved in.”

Craig doesn’t let the naysayers get to him. He has seen his vines become healthier as the years pass and the nutrient content of his soil improves.

“I do soil and petiole samples every year,” he says. “The plants are right where they need to be.”

Keeler Estate bottled its first vintage in 2011.

“We were well initiated . . . The coldest year in I don’t know how long,” Gabriele says. “We didn’t harvest until November.”

Although that harvest was difficult, Gabriele says the vintage is one of her favorites. “I personally think that wines that come from cooler vintages are the best ones,” she says. “They turned out absolutely beautiful and they are to this day. It was really fun to go out into the market for the first time and have these beautiful wines.”

Keeler Estate has continued to have success with its wines, crafted by winemaker Kelly Kidneigh. The tasting menu is a lineup of five excellent vintages beginning with an unusual pinot gris aged in an oak barrel, which gives it a really complex flavor unique in a pinot gris, to a pinot noir reserve that is sweet and smoky.

A trip to the barrel room reveals why Keeler Estate’s wines are so exceptional. Craig comes alive with an artist’s energy as he describes the various origins of the wood that makes up his barrels and the unique clay and stainless steel wine tanks in various shapes. There are no corners cut here. Each wine is treated with the utmost of care every step of the process — and the results are evidenced in each bottle.

“We’re kind of like a hidden gem,” Gabriele says. “Once people discover us, they’re friends forever.” 🍷

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