

TROTHE

Luxury Winery with Space for Custom Crush

Andrew Adams

Andrew Adams is the editor of the *Wine Analytics Report* and grew up in the city of Sonoma, Calif., before graduating from the University of Oregon with a degree in journalism. In addition to working at daily newspapers for more than a decade, Adams worked in the cellar and lab at the former Starmont winery in Napa Valley before writing and editing at *Wines & Vines* magazine for nearly a decade.

IN EARLY AUGUST, WINEMAKER RAY MCKEE was contemplating another harvest in Washington from his office located at the new Trothe winery in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA near the city of Prosser, Wash.

The 2022 vintage is McKee's 30th, and he said he expected the grapes for sparkling wine wouldn't be picked for another two weeks at least, and the reds were only about halfway through veraison. A vintage that had seemed set to arrive early had reverted to more typical timing, following a rare spring snowstorm that dropped several inches in early April. That snow melted within hours of accumulating, thanks to daytime highs in the 40s, but McKee said it was the first spring snow that eastern Washington had seen in decades. "It was gone before you could even get out and make a snowman out of it."

A bit of weather weirdness seems downright pedestrian compared to the ongoing disruptions set in motion by a global pandemic. It's been a challenging couple of harvests for even the most well-established estate wineries, but McKee had been trying to build a new winery in the face of myriad delays and supply shortages. As the former red wine winemaker at Chateau Ste. Michelle, McKee had more than a decade of experience managing—large-scale construction projects—but even that did not prepare him for the delays of the past year.

"We built some big, big projects, and I've never seen anything go haywire this badly—but then it's the same for everyone out there," he said on a video call with *Wine Business Monthly*. "All you can do is just work together. It's no fault of anyone that you can't find steel panels for six months and so many little things that slow the process down."

Though its construction had been delayed by months, the winery is part of the latest stage of an Eastern Washington agricultural legacy that spans decades. The winery is owned by Andrews Family Vineyards, which encompasses 1,300 acres of vines in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA. Although the family planted its first 20 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in 1994, the Andrews have a long history of farming that stretches back to 1920. The name Trothe comes from an archaic word to describe loyalty or a pledged faithfulness, and the brand is the Andrews' first estate wine.

McKee said Mike Andrews and his son Jeff first approached him about six years ago with the idea of an estate winemaking project. The Andrews

were working with around 40 vineyard customers who were raking in the accolades—and sales—of wines produced from the vineyard. McKee recalled Mike Andrews saying he wanted to make the best Cabernet possible from the vineyard to which McKee replied he knew exactly which vineyard blocks to use and that he'd been waiting for such an opportunity his entire career.

Prior to working with the Andrews' family, McKee grew up helping at his parents' vineyard and winery in the Yakima Valley and gained more experience at several other wineries in the state besides Ste. Michelle.

"We started very small. The inaugural 2018 release was only five barrels; but along the way, we just kept reinforcing that long-term goal of making the very best Andrews' estate Cabernet possible," he said. "The concept of a winery came in because, if we really want to be doing that—the very best possible—we needed complete control."

Plan B for 2021 Harvest

Complete control may have been the vision, but it had to wait due to the delays of 2021. Thankfully for McKee and the Andrews family, there were other options.

"It was the Zirkle Four Feathers Winery. There are great people there. I've known them my whole career, and I've done a lot of work with them in the past, but we had a very quick conversation where I said, 'Help,' and they said, 'Yeah, let's make this work,'" McKee recalled. The Zirkles are another well-established farming family with a long history in Eastern Washington. "It turned out brilliant. We all talk about the congeniality of our business in Washington, and then you get in a real bind, and somebody really comes through for you. It's fantastic."

McKee has no complaints with the general contractor, Mountain States Construction, which he says did an excellent job, contending with continual and severe supply shortages. Eastern Washington also remains a rural region with a small pool of subcontractors who were in demand from countless other clients, trying to get their own delayed construction projects back on schedule. "It was a blessing to be able to make our wine exactly how we wanted to at Four Feathers," McKee said. "That was just stupendous, and now we're getting into the vintage, and we've brought back all our equipment



and set up our tanks. Everything's up and running, so now it's like a bad dream you hardly remember."

That is, of course, aside from the fact that all the regular harvest preparation has also been a challenge because of ongoing supply chain delays. As a winemaker who has worked in Washington almost his entire career, McKee is used to ordering early and extra as equipment and supplies typically land at a port in California and then need to be trucked up to Washington. "Last year we had barrels that were on the water for five months, and there's nothing my cooper can do about it. You're crying on each other's shoulders," he remembered. "Last year was horrible, and it's not become better."

But while it hasn't been easy, McKee said he was thrilled to be breaking in a new facility with the 2022 harvest. As control and quality remain the foremost goal, McKee invested in a Pellenc M destemmer on the crush pad with a WECO optical sorter. All the grapes used for Trothe are picked by hand except for the Sauvignon Blanc, which is harvested via a Pellenc machine. The red clusters are collected in half-ton MacroBins that are dumped directly into the Pellenc destemmer and then emptied onto a Bucher Vaslin sorting table, which feeds the optical sorter.

The winery is equipped with a mix of stainless-steel tanks by Spokane Stainless and concrete fermenters by Nico Velo and Nomblot. Aside from whole-cluster ferments, almost all of the red must is transferred via a peristaltic pump that McKee prefers because of its gentler pumping mechanism. "It's not as fast as some of your modern positive displacement pumps, but the peristaltic is very gentle, and there's almost no crushing in it," he explained.



Every tank is hooked up to glycol for heating and chilling and is controlled by a TankNet system. A few larger stainless-steel tanks can accommodate up to 6 tons and will be used for blending and bottling. Most of the cellar equipment came via Central Industrial Sales, which also provided custom stainless-steel fabrication.

McKee expects to crush around 120 tons in 2022 with about a quarter of that for Trothe. Clients who use the winery are charged a flat, per-ton rate while some vineyard clients are just using the crush pad and then hauling the processed grapes back to their own facilities. The winery is fully booked for the 2022 vintage—and that came through just from word of mouth discussions among wineries that were seeking an option for high-end red winemaking. "The building was designed to be expandable, and we're taking reservations for next year's clients already," he said.

A few of the concrete tanks are equipped with built-in pump-over systems, and a client installed some open-top oak vats with built-in pumps as well. McKee said because Trothe and the custom clients are working with smaller lots that are destined for the high-end market, they can provide as much hands-on work as possible. "We can do anything and everything," he stated. "We could délestage every fermenter in here, if we wanted, because we have the time and space, (or) we could punch-down everything too."

Small Lots, Total Focus

For Trothe and the half-dozen clients that booked custom crush services for 2022, McKee said the average fermentation lot will be 2 to 4 tons, and the winery can run more than two dozen fermentations simultaneously.





McKee expects the Trothe fermentations will average 10 to 12 days, primarily based on his experience making red wine in Washington state. “This far north we have an intensity of sunshine—17 hours a day—so we have a lot of phenolic material and tannin available in our grapes,” he said. “I love making inky, black Syrah with the luxurious, velvety mouthfeel of the tannins you get out of Syrah, and most of the time I accomplish this in about an eight-day fermentation with four délestages.”

One other piece of Pellenc equipment McKee is excited about using is a pair of new Pellenc Smart Presses that he says offer unparalleled technology to create a fully inert press chamber and pan. “The juicing pan is fully sealed, and it has actuated valves so you can juice your whites under as inert an environment as I’ve seen,” he explained.

The latest generation of the presses features a larger juicing area and performs better at lower pressures, and he said they are much easier to clean and sanitize.



“They just open right up so you can clean both sides and be sanitary clean inside in a very small amount of time.”

In terms of oak for Trothe, McKee has found the barrels from Dargaud & Jaegle to consistently provide a great match to his style. This preference is based on several years of running various barrel trials, and McKee believes the Burgundian cooper produces delicate oak that still has plenty of structure to stand up to Washington tannins. How much new oak McKee uses is based on how the vintage tastes: “‘19 was a little bit more of an elegant vintage, so I think our percentage was 70-ish new oak. ‘18 was a very rich, luxurious vintage, and I probably could have gone 100 percent new oak on it.” McKee added, “I’m looking for harmony and balance, and that’s how I approach oak. The 2021 is in barrel now, and it was a really luxurious vintage again, so I think I’m back up to 80 percent new oak again.”

Thinking about oak, managing fermentations and pressing all begins in the vineyard. “It’s an accumulation of data through the whole year,” McKee said. “There’s easy data like, ‘Oh, it’s a small berry year in Cabernet, and now I know I’m going to have intensity. If you’re walking your blocks, you pick up on the little details: you can see how uniform your vintage is going to be early on, even at berry set.”

Helping McKee in the cellar is assistant winemaker Justin Michaud, who has worked at wineries in California’s Central Coast, New Zealand and Washington before joining Trothe. Vineyard manager Todd Chapman helped develop Destiny Ridge Vineyard for Alexandria Nicole Cellars in the Horse Heaven Hills and was a viticulturist for Ste. Michelle. “We have a lot of knowledge

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and a lot of passion, but it's a small team, so it's easy to be nimble," McKee observed. "We change our minds all the time to meet the vintage. I can't make an amazing wine unless those grapes are amazing."

McKee said he and Jeff Andrews talked extensively about the style of wine the family wanted to make even before the project had officially become Trothe. While the goal was to make a wine of the highest caliber and comparable to Bordeaux and Napa, it was just as important to not lose sight of its origin. "We were of the same mind to produce a wine of terroir that can always be recognized as being made from Andrews' vineyards in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA and that would sit at the table of world-class wines," he explained. "My expertise is in making the wine to achieve our goal, Todd's is to grow the grapes necessary to accomplish the goal, and Jeff's is to manage our business so that we can even try to get to this goal and also provide grounded, respectful, collaborative leadership."

Crypto and Cab Enthusiasts

While the winery was designed to expand as needed, any expansion likely won't be to facilitate a major increase in Trothe production. Since launching in 2018, the brand has remained 100-percent direct-to-consumer, with all production allocated to members of the winery's Founder's List. McKee said about 60 percent of club members live outside of Washington but are keenly aware of the state's ability to produce fine wine. The rest are from the I-5 corridor, stretching from Seattle to Portland, Ore. and down to California. "We actually pulled in quite a few wine lovers who are crypto enthusiasts, as well, because we do accept cryptocurrency for our wines and have from the very beginning."

The winery does not have a tasting room, and there aren't any plans for one as the wine is both hand-made and hand-sold via allocation and recommendations by existing club members. McKee said he had just recently returned from a "sales trip" to Colorado to pour wines for a club member's networking event that featured Washington wines. McKee and his team will host members at the winery if they are in the area. "We're building this business exactly how we want to be living because wine is definitely a lifestyle business," he noted.

The Trothe label features an intricate logo of a triangle that encloses three smaller ones which point to four dots on top of a circle. McKee said the logo

technical review

was designed by Seattle-based Doubleknot Creative based on input from the Andrews family. The three smaller triangles form an image similar to an ancient Celtic symbol known as an "awen" that typically has three dots, which have multiple interpretations, including the Holy Trinity; the geophysical earth, sea and air; the holistic body, mind and spirit; or the philosophical love, wisdom and truth.

That Middle English symbolism jibes with the Middle English word Trothe, but McKee said the winery's label features four dots to represent the four generations of the Andrews family. "Our goal was to communicate on our label our love for the land, the generations that have gone into this land, the generations that will continue on after this and our goal of crafting this wine that helps continue the elevation of Washington state." **WBM**

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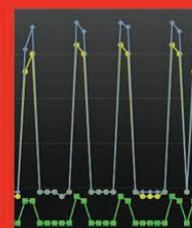
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