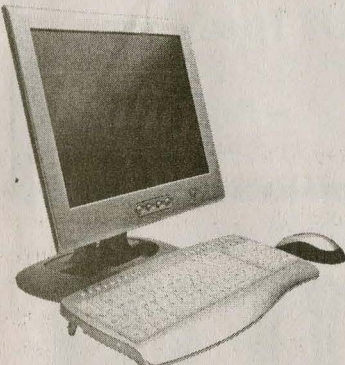


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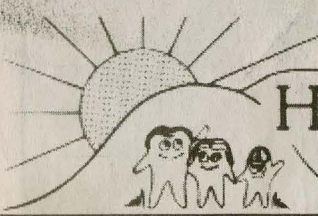
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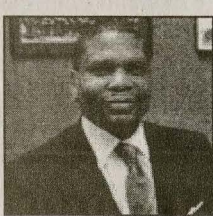
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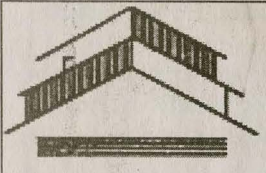


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Local Winemaker Looks To Expand His Niche In The Market

By Chris B. Bennett
Co-publisher/editor

Growing up DS Benbow had no idea that a remedy that he had discovered to deal with severe stomach aches would help lead him into the exclusive field of winemaking, but after growing an affinity for wines and years honing his palette and skills he has successfully launched his own label – Benbow Estates – with a unique blend called Ambrosia Red.

As a kid, Benbow used to get stomach aches due to having a very sensitive stomach. So much so that he would sometimes leave the dinner table, go to his room and ball up for like about an hour before being able to come back to the dinner table and sit down.

"That happened for years," said Benbow. "Everything that my mom tried didn't work."

One day, when he was twelve, Benbow, who was experiencing a stomach ache at the time, saw a bottle of communion wine that his father and mother, who were deacons and deaconesses in the Baptist church, had stored in the refrigerator and decided to drink some of the wine in an attempt to subdue the pain of his stomach ache.

"I was desperate and decided to give it a shot," said Benbow.

"It made my stomach feel better, so every time I had a stomach ache I'd take a little snip," he explained.

Eventually, Benbow's mother found out about his remedy and gave her approval.

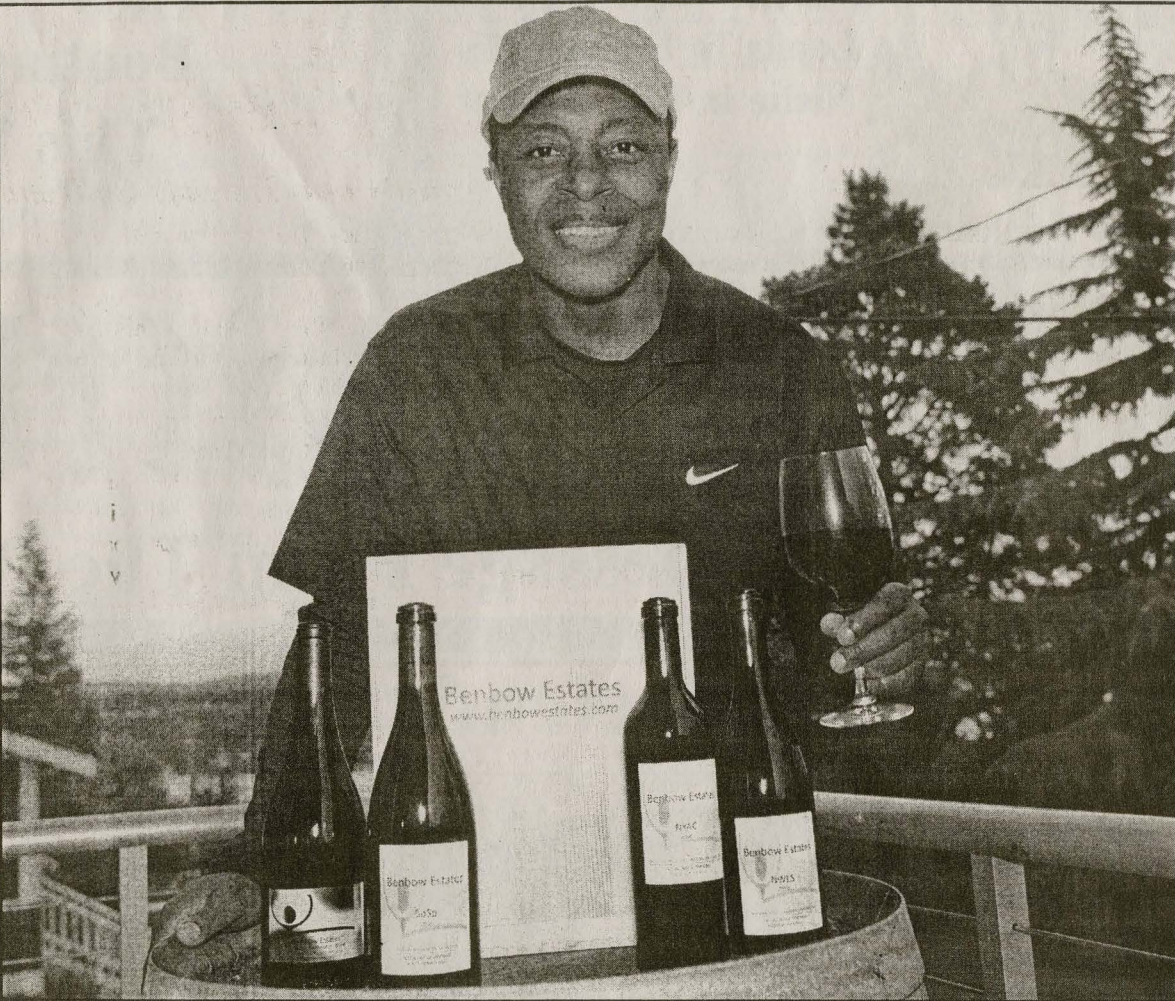
"She said it was okay as long as you don't abuse it," said Benbow.

As he got older, Benbow upgraded his selection of wines, but it wasn't until he started working for a start-up tech company in Seattle that his knowledge and passion for wine grew.

"The CEO and a couple of execs were big into wine, and we would go to wine bars in downtown Seattle to do wine tastings," recalled Benbow. "At that point, I began to understand the characteristics of a how bordo Bordeaux and how they werewas supposed to taste and the difference between a burgundy and a pinot – which come from the same grape."

"I became intrigued by the landscape in which wine exists," he continued. "When you are sitting and drinking wine with others, you are usually eating good food or having a good conversation. You may be passionately debating, but you are infrequently upset or angry and [for me] it became a nice counter-balance to tech."

12 years ago, Benbow took his first stab at winemaking. He started off by making a Cabernet and then followed it up with a



Seattle-based winemaker DS Benbow Displays some of his hand-crafted luxury wines. Benbow, the only African American winery owner in a five state region, wants to educate people on how to drink and what to expect from good wine. Staff Photo/Chris B. Bennett

Chardonnay.

"I made my first batch right here at home and it turned out pretty good," said Benbow. "My mom likes white wine and she tried it and thought it was pretty good and that kind of evolved into launching my own label last year."

According to Benbow, there are 7,200 winemakers in the United States, with only less than 10 of them owned by African Americans. As the lone African American winemaker winery owner in a five state area, Benbow sees great potential not only for his brand, but also as a catalyst to increase the number of African Americans who consume wine.

"As an industry, African American market penetration in wine consumption is only ten percent," he states. "So, there is a significant upside of the growth potential to attracting the African American market to wine."

In his first year, Benbow produced four barrels, the equivalent of about 200 cases, of his signature blend Ambrosia Red. Despite limited distributions channels the flavorful blend sold out in 13 months. This year, Benbow doubled his production and produced three blends: the next version of Ambrosia Red (renamed SoSp), a left bank Bordo blend (a heavy merlot called NYAC), and a white vignette blend (called NWLS).

Benbow takes great pride in the quality of his product, and produces nothing that he would not enjoy himself. His, luxury hand-crafted wines range from \$29.00 to \$49.00 per bottle.

"My goal is to not make cheap wine, but to educate

people on how to drink good wine and what to expect from good wine," says Benbow.e."

According to Benbow, winemaking can be a very capital intensive business, and the costs associated with producing wine in significant quantities makes it very difficult to sustain. However, Benbow's, self-financed business model is what is called a virtual winery, where he works with a vineyard to supply his grapes and he has an agreement with a large Washington-based winery that allows him to use their facilities for production, labeling and bottling. While he admits that his business model might be limiting in some regards, it allows him to keep down costs, concentrate on crafting and, marketing and distributing his wines, and be solely responsible for his business decisions.

"Having worked in a number of start-ups I wanted to be able to call all of the shots this time around," said Benbow with regards to his decision to self-finance the venture.

"Eventually, I wish to own my own facilities, but the relationship that I have [with the winery] is really goodvery favorable," added Benbow. "It's a large winery and all of their facilities are top notch."

While the transition to winemaking hasn't been easy, Benbow said he has had a lot of help along the way. Various winemakers advised him about wine making techniques, equipment, label design, bottling-operations, etc. all of which he is very grateful to have received.

"A lot number of Northwest winemakers have helped me hone my craft," says Benbow. "I've had a lot of help assistance on the operational side of the business to really help me get to where I am today."

Winemaking is not something that can be done overnight, as it typically takes 12 – 22 months once a red blend is

barrelled before it is ready for bottling, and about 3-6 months for white blend. That leaves plenty of time for Benbow to build relationships, market and brand his wines. For Benbow, winemaking is more than just a business venture, it is a lifestyle. A lifestyle that is ready to embrace, one that is juxtaposedhe prefers to that of someone in the tech industry.

"One of the things that is a downside to working in tech at Microsoft is that the time commitment is intense you're so disconnected from your friends, the community, and you're just very laser focused on work," said Benbow. "One of the beautiful things about the wine business is that connecting with others is part of the work. Having conversations is part of the work. Eating great food and meeting interesting people is part of the work, and that's an interesting quality of life for me."

In the future, Benbow hopes to engage a small distributor to help grow his business, and to export his blends into an African country outside of the U.S. Benbow says that he probably will not produce more four different blends and looks to eventually incorporate a lower price point product.

"My goal in the next five years is to be in the neighborhood of 5,000 cases, and getting the brand of Benbow Estates in to the heads of more people."

When looking back at everything that has transpired throughout his life and work career, one can easily say that his journey through life has helped prepare him for this moment. His years in the tech industry have provided him with the skills to market and brand products, and a remedy for stomach aches has helped inspire and infuse a passion that he has turned into a lifestyle. A lifestyle that he hopes will be the center of conversations at many celebrations and social outings alike.

"I don't have any farming skill sets," said Benbow referring to growing of grapes, which is the heart of the industry. "But I do have marketing skill sets, and I have a knack for making a good bottle of wine."

Benbow Estates' blends are available at select Washington locations, and through the website www.benbowestates.com.

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