

Washington Wine Report

FOCUS REPORT – FIGGINS

December 2011

What follows is a Focus Report on FIGGINS. Download a .pdf version of this report [here](#). Read previous Focus Reports [here](#).

A Family With a Storied Past and a Bright Future

“I believe in terroir,” winemaker Chris Figgins of [Figgins Family Wine Estates](#) says. “It’s where I spend my time and energy is thinking about vineyards and trying to express the site.”

Figgins comes from one of the first families of Washington wine. In 1974, Chris’ father Gary Figgins was working as a machinist at the Continental Can Company when he decided to plant an acre of Cabernet Sauvignon by the family home in Walla Walla. In 1977, he and his wife, Nancy, founded [Leonetti Cellar](#).

At the time, the Washington wine industry was a mere speck. Walla Walla Valley was non-existent as a wine grape growing region. But that was all about to change, with the Figgins family playing a leading role.

Leonetti Cellar produced its first vintage in 1978. The 1978 Cabernet was entered into a competition and judged by Wine & Spirits magazine “the best Cabernet produced in America.” This was the first of a long string of accolades, with Leonetti now having too many high scores and Top 100 rankings to mention.

A Father’s Dream



When Chris Figgins started college at Washington State University, he intended to study architecture and engineering. Despite the fact that the family had been running Leonetti Cellar for many years, Figgins hadn’t expressed much interest in drinking wine. Suddenly in college he found himself captivated by it. What changed? “I ran out of beer!” Figgins says with a laugh.

One day as he was thinking about a career in architecture, he had an epiphany. “If I do this, I’m going to spend my life under fluorescent lights by a computer,” he thought. Figgins, who had worked on farms, fields, and vineyards growing up, had a different idea. “I wanted to grow stuff,” he said.

Figgins made a phone call to his father. “I said to him, ‘What if I change my major to horticulture and we plant our own vineyards?’” he recalls. His father’s response was supportive but neutral, wanting to let his

IN THIS REPORT

A Father’s Dream	1
A Son’s Dream	2
A Special Site	2
Establishing Biodiversity	3
The Inaugural Release	4
Wine Rating System	5

“If I’m going to do this, I’m going to spend my life under fluorescent lights by a computer...I wanted to grow stuff.”

child make his own decision. His mother later told him that Gary Figgins cried that night when he got off the phone. It would be one of the happiest days of his life.

Chris Figgins' first full vintage at Leonetti was 1996. Since that time the winery has transitioned to using exclusively estate fruit from the Walla Walla Valley for its wines. By 2001, Chris Figgins had assumed head winemaking responsibilities from his father.

A Son's Dream

Though he had fulfilled his wish to move the Leonetti wines to estate vineyards, Chris Figgins had another dream – to make one wine from a single, estate vineyard. As a terroirist, the idea of expressing a specific site through a bottle of wine had tremendous appeal. “If I could start from scratch, I'd make all of our wines (at Leonetti) single vineyard wines,” Figgins says. Without this option, he began to explore other possibilities.

“When we saw this piece of land, we knew it was special.”

At first, Figgins thought about trying to make a single vineyard wine under the Leonetti label. The winery had made single vineyard wines from Seven Hills Vineyard in the past. However, Figgins felt that it didn't quite fit with what Leonetti was currently doing. Rather, he felt the project would have to be its own winery.

Figgins says it took his parents some time to come around to the idea of starting a separate winery dedicated to a single vineyard, with the concern being that it might distract from the Leonetti brand. But the concern was about more than the brand. “I am their retirement plan!” Figgins says laughing. Once his parents' approval was in place, there was, however, another pressing matter – finding the right site.

A Special Site



Talking with Chris Figgins, he exudes enthusiasm and knowledge about soil and vineyard science. It is clearly not just his profession but also his passion.

Figgins first came upon what is now FIGGINS Vineyard while looking for property to build a house. He got a call from a family friend who was selling off parcels of land after the passing of his father. Intriguingly, the land was a half-mile from Leonetti's Mill Creek Upland Vineyard, at a slightly higher elevation.

The day before Thanksgiving in 2003, Chris met with his friend, who threw out a price. They shook on it. Figgins closed on the property within a week. Figgins says of the site, “When we saw this piece of land, we knew it was special.”

While the decision to purchase the land was made quickly, the process of establishing the vineyard was long and laborious. First Figgins had to purchase water rights to another piece of land and transfer it to the site, taking several years. Then the site had to be prepared for planting.

The FIGGINS Vineyard property was originally a wheat field. Figgins started by ripping the land four feet deep. He created a series of compost teas, which he brewed at Leonetti, to help restore the soil from years of wheat farming. Next came planting the vineyard.

To do this, Figgins used multiple different spacings depending on the location and varietal, angling the vineyard slightly southwest. A double cordon system was used to increase plant density, shoot density, and plant population. Figgins also used the system to open up light and airflow.

“I’m a big proponent of balance in terms of spacing,” Figgins says. “You want it to be as tight as you can get and still be in balance and no tighter.”

“We sacrificed rows and acreage to build in biodiversity.”

The vineyard is physically beautiful. The nearby hills contain some of the last wooded areas in upper Mill Creek. Figgins says that long ago, peopled used the area’s trees for target practice. The buckshot in the trees subsequently stopped them from being logged.

The rows of the vineyard have limestone posts brought in from Kansas, a tribute to the Figgins family’s roots there. There is a well house made of stone that came from a root cellar in Milton–Freewater. The building bears a plaque with a quote from Byron, “Till taught by pain, men know not water’s worth.” Figgins explains the meaning by quoting Mark Twain saying, “Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting over.”

Establishing Biodiversity



keep the plants in the vineyard in a continual bloom. With pollen in the vineyard, predatory pests stay all year long.

In creating the vineyard, Figgins put a premium on establishing biodiversity. Figgins has been at the forefront of sustainable winegrowing practices in Washington through his work with [Vinea](#), a Walla Walla Valley organization dedicated to sustainability.

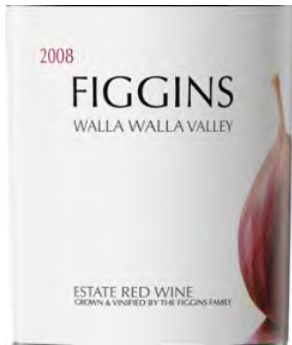
A variety of species were planted throughout the vineyard, with native plants, such as lupin and native roses, used as much as possible. Walking through the vineyard, it is resplendent with life. There are butterflies, flowers, bushes, and honeybees literally everywhere.

“We sacrificed rows and acreage to build in biodiversity,” Figgins explains. He says the goal is to

32 acres are currently planted to Cabernet, Merlot, and Petit Verdot. The vines were planted on their own rootstock, with the first plantings in 2005. Figgins decided not to use the vineyard's initial fruit in 2007. "Knowing I was going for a high end project, it wasn't time," he says, adding, "You can make great wine on young vines. It's just more difficult."

Due to the vineyard's high elevation, 1,500 to 1,700 feet, it sees a 35–40 degree diurnal shift. Figgins says that, like clockwork, cold air flows down the canyons of Mill Creek each night. This helps preserve the acidity in the grapes. The vineyard has deep silt loam and receives approximately twenty-two inches of rainfall annually.

The Inaugural Release



The label design of the 2008 [FIGGINS](#) Estate Red Wine, designed by the Seattle firm [Boxwood](#), is eye catching, sleek, and minimalistic. The label itself is white. 'FIGGINS Walla Walla Valley' is written in a plain font on the center of the bottle. 'Estate Red Wine Grown and Vinified by the Figgins Family' is in the lower part of the label. Off right is an image of a fig painted by local artist Todd Telander. The side of the label reads, "FIGGINS – 'the son of FIG' 13th C Great Britain Surname." Beneath this is information about the vineyard's elevation and aspect.

The 2008 wine saw 22 months in barrel and one year in bottle prior to release. Figgins made approximately 900 cases in 2008 with the intent of growing the winery slowly to approximately 4,000 over the next decade or so.

The inaugural FIGGINS Estate Red Wine is arresting, full of earth, floral notes, and fruit aromas and flavors. The wine is simultaneously rich, structured, and light on its feet. As with the recent releases at Leonetti Cellar, this wine is very much about elegance and vineyard expression and is far from a fruit and barrel wine. It is among the more compelling wines to be released in 2011.

As the industry continues to grow and expand at an incredible rate, it is impossible not to reflect on the enormous impact the Figgins family has had on the Washington wine industry over the last thirty-five years. Tasting this wine, it seems clear that the family has only begun to leave its mark.

FIGGINS Estate Red Wine Walla Walla Valley 2008 \$85

Rating: ★★ (Exceptional) An almost endless list of aromas including scorched earth, red and black fruit, bittersweet chocolate, floral notes, and licorice. Wound up tightly initially, the palate is dense and rich with fruit and earth flavors while remaining incredibly elegant. A seemingly endless finish. Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, and Merlot. Aged 22 months in French oak (70% new). 14.3% alcohol.

Wine Rating System

- ★★ **An exceptional wine.** Buy it now and either tell all your friends about it or keep it very, very secret, depending on your personality and availability.
 - ★ **An excellent wine.** Convince a friend to buy some and share it with you.
 - ✚ **A good wine.** Worth drinking. If it represents a particular value, I will list it as *Recommended*.
 - **A decent wine.** Drink it if you must.
 - **A flawed wine.** Refuse this wine if served.
- NR Not Rated.** Given to wines too young to be properly evaluated.

Read more about the Rating System [here](#).



Washington Wine Report (www.wawinereport.com) is an independent blog focused on bringing Washington wine to you and bringing you to Washington wine. Our goal is to help you select Washington wines at a variety of price levels; keep you up-to-date about the state's wineries, vineyards, and individuals; help you plan trips to wine country; and connect you to the larger wine community. Email Sean P. Sullivan at wawinereport@gmail.com with questions or comments.