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From Drug Enforcement to Winemaking: Greg Lambrecht Pursues His Passion

Sonoma, CA April 5, 2010 — Some might think it would be a great leap to become a winemaker after 10 years chasing drug traffickers in the Caribbean. But when Greg Lambrecht was stationed in Petaluma, CA, during his 23-year stint in the Coast Guard, he fell in love with the wine regions and wine. Lambrecht, and his wife Karen, are now the proud owners of Serpent Ridge Vineyard & Winery in Westminster, MD. The winery released its first vintages in 2007 to high acclaim, including Gold, Silver, and Bronze Medals from the Wine Masters Choice, the Indianapolis International Wine, and the Maryland Governor's Cup competitions.

"I was going to retire in 2009," says Lambrecht, "so in 2002, after meeting my wife Karen who shares my enthusiasm for wine, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. We purchased a couple of acres along a forested road in Carroll County, MD, and started planting vines of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, and Norton grapes."

Lambrecht also attended tradeshow and took as many viticulture and enology classes as he could find, as well as continuing to work towards a certificate in winemaking from UC Davis. Today, his wines include two Cabernet blends, the Vintner's Cabernet and Basilisk, and two white varietals, Albarino and the Seyval Blanc, a chardonnay style wine from grapes grown in Damascus, MD. All have been awarded medals in local competitions. "While we're very happy at all the attention, we still have the challenge of overcoming the stigma that still faces East Coast wines," says Lambrecht. "The perception is that the mid-Atlantic region can produce only sweet wine. But we've proven our dry red varietals can stand up to any national competitor."

Another challenge facing Serpent Ridge and the other 30 or so Maryland wineries are the strict and confusing local laws. After prohibition ended in 1933, the federal government gave each state the right to regulate alcohol. Maryland passed regulatory decisions on to the individual counties. Thus, some counties have very strict alcohol laws,

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while others are actually selling alcohol themselves. "Farmers markets have recently become very popular," says Lambrecht, "but we're limited to only three special-event permits a year where we can sell our wines, which seriously restricts our marketing efforts."

Despite these drawbacks, Lambrecht and his wife are excited by the growing interest in wine in the state. "The demographics are fascinating. . .we have customers from the 20-something set to the very experienced wine connoisseur."

All of the Serpent Ridge wines are capped with a ZORK closure, which consists of three components: an outer, tamper-evident cap; an inner foil oxygen barrier; and a plunger that "pops" when extracted without a corkscrew. "We discovered ZORK when we were in Australia visiting my sister-in-law," Lambrecht says, "and the following year, it was at the Wineries Unlimited tradeshow. I've always been a fan of new technologies and this was a perfect fit with our brand concept: the peeled off strip actually looks like a coiled snake!" Lambrecht and his wife have had only a positive response to the closure from customers in the tasting room ("They can easily reseal an unfinished bottle"), from retailers ("It stands out on the shelf.") and from restaurants ("It's easy to open."). He does have one funny story to tell, though, about a woman who gave her grandfather a bottle of the Serpent Ridge Basilisk for a present. She got a call back from him thanking her for the gift, but he just couldn't get it open with his corkscrew.

This year's Serpent Ridge releases will include a new bottlenecker that explains all the features and benefits of ZORK, from its recyclability and resealability to the fact that no corkscrews are required.

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