

BALISTRERI VINEYARDS A FAMILY AFFAIR

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Balistreri has won a number of awards for its wines in the winery's 10-year history.

Julie Balistreri swirls the garnet-colored Syrah around in the glass and then holds it up to her nose for a sniff.

"Wow," she says, her eyes widening. "Do you smell that black pepper?"

Julie and her father, **John**, are in the storage room of Balistreri Vineyards engaged in a barrel tasting -- that's when they sample some wine from the oak barrels the wine is aging in to see which ones are ready for bottling. Over the next few weeks, they'll sample nearly 200 barrels of wine. When it's all said and done, they will end up with about 50,000 bottles of wine.

John is the winemaker, and Julie jokes her title is "the winemaker's daughter." They've officially been making wine since 1998, but John made wine as a hobby for as long as Julie can remember. It's a family affair at Balistreri Vineyards -- Julie's mom, **Birdie**, is also involved in the business.

Their family has been on the land in unincorporated Adams County since the early 1900s. Back then they were "truck farmers," growing and selling vegetables. A while later they grew fresh-cut flowers, and when that business moved to South America it was time for another change. That's how a winery is born.

Julie, 43 and a mother of four, left Colorado State University early to help her family with the flower business. She says the agriculture department at CSU wanted her to stay, but she had a real-world age education to pursue back home. They still grow some grapes on their land, but 98 percent of the grapes for their wines are brought in from vineyards on the Western Slope.

The Balistreris pride themselves in making natural wines, free of additives or sulfites. They get grapes from 12 growers and keep close track of them, actually stamping on the bottle's label from which vineyard the grapes came. They don't produce blends, Julie says, because then "you might lose the flavor of a really good grape."



"I want good grapes," she says, "otherwise we can't make good wine."

John Balistreri samples some wine from one of the barrels to see if it's ready for bottling.

This time of the year, the Balistreris stay busy helping customers in the tasting room, "babysitting" the barrels and hosting events at the vineyard. But "crush season" is coming up, Julie says, and that's when things get really crazy.

The grapes start arriving in September, and for the next two months, the days are filled with crushing grapes -- 1,000 pounds in 20 minutes in an electric crusher -- and the nights are filled with bottling wine to free up the barrels for the next round of wine.

She says the growers get a bit antsy at harvest time fretting about the grapes, but after being a winemaker for 10 years now, she knows there's no use worrying about things beyond her control.

"I just say, 'Take it easy, take it easy,'" she says. "When they're ready, they're ready. As a winemaker, I'm not anxious -- I want to get it just right."
