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Samantha Cole-Johnson, October 2, 2026

Liska

In the Portland market, Liska is everywhere – not just because the wines are good and affordable but also because they're different. In an ocean of producers competing to make the best Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Chris Butler and his wife, Draga Zheleva, make Grüner Veltliner, Pinot Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Mondeuse, Gamay and Syrah.

Sitting at a table at Cristom Winery, where Butler works as the assistant winemaker, he explains why he and his wife started Liska.

'In 2017, Draga and I worked together at Heymann-Löwenstein in Germany. We'd both just finished degrees at UC Davis and what we saw was completely different to how we'd been taught to make aromatic white wine. We'd been taught that to make aromatic whites you had to sacrifice structure and longevity in favour of freshness and aromatics – for instance, you direct press and put dry ice and sulphur in the press pan. In Germany we were told to crush grapes, leave them on their skins for eight to ten hours and hyperoxidise the juice. The results were beautiful and we realised there weren't many people approaching aromatic whites like that in the US.' Butler goes on to describe the structure that skin contact adds and the longevity you can achieve when phenolics are oxidised out.

After another harvest abroad, Butler and Zheleva made their way back to the US. Butler became the cellarmaster, then the assistant winemaker at Cristom. Zheleva began a PhD in biological and ecological engineering with a focus on agricultural engineering. Through it all, they continued to talk about what kinds of wines they'd make when they started their own label.

The arrival of 2020 brought a wave of uncertainty. 'We'd been discussing having a baby', shares Butler, 'but we weren't really making enough money to do that. Cristom couldn't give me a raise because of the uncertainty in the market. I asked if they would give me space to make my own wines instead. They agreed.'

In 2021, Butler and Zheleva made their first vintage of Liska – naming the project after the German shepherd they'd adopted in 2020. They found most of their fruit sources through Butler's connections. 'I knew I loved Holmes Hill vineyard because I work with it as Cristom. When I talked to the owner in 2021, he said he had a test plot with a whole bunch of varieties. That first year we bought Grüner Veltliner, Riesling and Gewürztraminer.'



This year they'll make around 1,500 cases. To stay competitive, they price their wines at $22–$36. 'We can make enough of a margin because it's just us, we don't have employees and we don't currently pay for space to make wine in', Butler says.

While Liska does not currently have international distribution, the wines are available in California, Oregon, Washington, Massachusetts, New York, Washington DC and Utah. The striking labels are designed by Zheleva, who creates each new design in linocut.