Yakima Valley Reaches Out To Learn From Down Under

By Kaish Schweck

Yakima and Australia are half a world apart, but there are many striking similarities between the two areas.

John Cooper, the president and CEO of Yakima Valley Tourism, recently led a small team of professionals from the region on a cultural exchange and educational trip to the southern part of Australia.

"One of the reasons that this district was chosen was because of the area's emphasis on agriculture," said Cooper. "And in particular the Barossa Valley has a very large focus on wine and is a major grape-growing region that is known for its Shiraz or Syrah. There is a large agricultural base in the area, much like our region here, which made it a perfect fit."

The month long trip was organized through Rotary International, which paired up two Rotary districts for the cultural exchange. Rotary District 5060, which extends all the way from Prosser up into British Columbia, consists of 59 Rotary clubs that have over 2,800 members. Four individuals, each representing different specialties, made up the Vocational Training Team that traveled to Rotary District 9500 in Australia. This district covers most of southern Australia, from the coastal city of Alice Springs, which are roughly 950 miles apart.

The team led by Cooper was focused on learning about Australian agriculture, viticulture, and cultural and agricultural team members were Lynn Bremmer, a wine industry veteran from British Columbia, Reto Gebert, a viticulturist also from British Columbia, as well as Jim Blonde, owner of West Valley U-Pick in Yakima.

"Each person brings back something different," said Cooper. "They each learned something that they can use in their career and in their life."

I think that these career educational opportunities that Rotary provides is a great opportunity to learn new ideas and techniques and take them home."

Cooper said that he was busy as the organizer of the trip, but that he also learned many valuable things. "I was quite interested myself, being that I work in tourism, about how a wine-growing region presents itself, like the Barossa Valley and the Clare Valley."

"The Clare Valley has a very great wine, tourism and food visitor center. They add local products to their visitor center and have wine tastings like we do here, but they are incorporating more local food and I was fascinated to see how well they do it and market that."

One of the things that Cooper was most impressed with was the transportation network for visitors and tourists in the Barossa Valley.

"They are very blessed with an extensive investment that they have made in bicycle trails in and around the Barossa Valley that went between the different wineries and vineyards. Sometimes they used old train tracks or even just built completely new trails that were away from the roads."

"What is also great about this exchange is that we just finished hosting five folks from South Australia," Cooper said. "One of them was a wine maker with Taylor Wines, which produces over 1,000,000 cases of wine per year. His name was Ben and he really enjoyed meeting one-on-one with some of our producers here in the Yakima Valley."

The visiting team from Australia had some travel complications getting to Yakima, but once they were here they received a warm welcome.

"It was a great opportunity to hear and learn from their experiences over there, but they were also excited to hear about what we are doing," said Cooper. "While they (the Barossa Region) focus mostly on growing Shiraz grapes, they were surprised to hear how many varietals, and high-end varietals, we can grow in Washington state."

Each visiting team was hosted by local Rotarians and stayed in their homes to get a true taste of the local culture.

"That is a great way to meet people and learn their culture," said Cooper. "One thing that I noticed while I was in Australia, and it was great to learn about careers and ideas, but it really just boils down to people. And the people in Australia are so friendly and giving and just great all-around people. It was the people that made it such a great experience."

Cooper was inspired by many things that he saw and experienced on the trip. He is working to bring what he learned over there and use it to benefit the Yakima Valley.

"I'm looking at what Clare Valley is doing with their visitor center and by expanding the local products and offerings and how they position and present what the Clare Valley is about. Now I'm looking at ways to improve our visitor center. We currently have wine there. We currently have tastings there. But we are looking at other means to help educate people about the local products."

"I think that everyone in their career should have the opportunity to go to a different country or even just a different state and learn how they do things there," said Cooper. "In the least expected place you will find something valuable to bring back."

For more information and to see pictures from the trips, visit www.vrtotary.wordpress.com or the Facebook page, which is linked from the website.

Above, Jim Blonde and John Cooper of Yakima (in red) visit the Adelaide Botanical Gardens in Australia. At right is the group that represented the U.S. and Canada: Lynn Bremmer (left) and Reto Gebert (right) of British Columbia flanking Blonde and Cooper.