

Wine Spectator

Washington An Open Secret

World-class wines flow from this unheralded quality frontier

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Issue: December 15, 2010

Once known only for its winter wheat and sweet onions, Walla Walla today makes some of the best wine in America. Elsewhere in eastern Washington, tracts of farmland that mainly grew apples, cherries and juice grapes a generation ago now produce outstanding, and occasionally phenomenal, wines, despite the desert climate. And in western Washington, a forest of highly regarded wineries has sprung up in the suburban Seattle town of Woodinville, just a few miles from Redmond, the home of Microsoft.

The state may still be better known for apples and computer codes, but over the past couple of decades it has become a world-class wine region, and one that is only going to get better with time. Whether you favor Riesling or Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot or Syrah, Washington can deliver pure fruit flavors and distinctive character at prices that won't break the bank.

The state ranks second only to California in total wine production in the United States, with 11 million cases produced from 36,000 acres in 2009. And it has been on a roll this decade, with one strong vintage after another (see "Washington's Rich Vein of Values," page 81). At every quality level, prices match up favorably with comparable bottlings from California and Europe.

And yet, sometimes it seems that only a few savvy insiders know how good the wines are. Only now are sommeliers, retailers and consumers discovering that. "The wines up there are awesome. I think they're on the cusp of taking off," says Jason Smith, wine director for the restaurants of the Bellagio in Las Vegas. "You mention Washington to some people and they get very excited. But you also hear, 'Washington? They make wine up there?'"

Chris Miller, sommelier at the Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning Spago restaurant in Beverly Hills, believes the best Washington wines can compete with Bordeaux super-seconds and famous Napa Valley Cabernets, which typically cost at least \$125 at retail. "And if you take away the few very expensive bottlings, Washington's prices get extremely reasonable very fast," says Miller. "Some of my favorites are in the \$40 to \$50 range."

Chris Adams, CEO of Sherry-Lehmann, says the venerable New York City wineshop stocks four times as many Washington wines now as it did at the start of the decade. It would be even more, but many of the smaller producers can't find distribution. "[Distributors] are focused on what they already own, what they already know," Adams explains. "It's frustrating for the producers. They know there are people out here who want to buy it. We sure do."

Washington's biggest player, though, is moving full steam ahead: Ste. Michelle Wine Estates reports a double-digit increase in sales in 2010. Owned by the tobacco company Altria, Ste. Michelle is the seventh-largest wine producer in the United States, and it simply dominates the state. It farms 3,525 acres of vineyards and contracts with independent growers for another 17,500, which accounts for about 60 percent of the winegrape acreage in the state.

Its Columbia Crest and Chateau Ste. Michelle brands hover around 2 million cases each year. Both wineries can hit the top rung with their best wines, such as Columbia Crest Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley Reserve 2005, which reached No. 1 on the 2009 Wine Spectator Top 100. Its smaller wineries, such as Northstar, Col Solare, Eroica and Spring Valley, specialize in specific varieties or regions. It also owns important wineries in Oregon and California, and imports prominent French, Italian, Chilean and New Zealand wines.

"On balance, being a Washington wine company helped more than hurt us," says Ted Baseler, who has been with Ste. Michelle since 1984, its CEO since 2000. "It put us in the great position of being an underdog. We had to fight harder, be more creative."

Only a few other companies exceed 100,000 cases. Exact figures are hard to pin down, but Precept Wine Brands (owner of Waterbrook), Constellation (Hogue), Ascentia (Columbia Winery) and Pacific Rim Winemakers, the Riesling specialist, would round out the top five. Most of the rest are small operations, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand cases.

Wine lovers are finally paying attention. "There has been a transition," Baseler says. "Around the mid-1990s we went from 'Oh, by the way, we're from Washington,' to 'We want to tell you that these wines come from Washington.'"

What makes Washington wines remarkable? As is the case everywhere, it begins with the terroir—the land and the climate. The state divides neatly into two very different landscapes: the wet west and the dry east, separated by the Cascade Range. Most of the rain coming off the Pacific Ocean peters out over its peaks, which exceed 14,000 feet. In eastern Washington, where 99 percent of the state's vineyards are located, average precipitation is just 8 inches; the standard definition for a desert climate is 10 inches or less.

Grapes cannot survive on such little rain, but fortunately for Washington a river runs through it—a big one. The mighty Columbia, which drains more water than any river in the West, winds through the main growing regions. That allows farmers to produce an abundance of pears, apples, cherries, wheat and, of course, grapes. In fact, Washington's first commercial vineyards were mostly planted to diversify, not replace, existing farms.

"We can grow a lot of things well here. That's unusual," says Kerry Shiels, whose family farms only wine grapes on its DuBrul Vineyard in Yakima Valley, sells to 16 wineries and bottles its own wine under the Côte Bonneville label. "Not a lot of regions in the world are this dry," she adds. "The unique thing is that it's a desert at this latitude. It gets hot but not excessively. You can achieve ripeness without going overripe."

Zelma Long, a longtime California winemaker who consults with several Washington wineries, explains why. "It's at the 45th and 46th parallels. They have much longer summer days than we do in California, and at harvest, the days get shorter and cooler much faster. I always

noticed that the temperatures were 10 degrees lower there than in California. You don't want a lot of heat then, so it's perfect."

The soils are also conducive to grapegrowing. At the end of the last Ice Age, some 15,000 years ago, a series of huge water events known as the Missoula Floods washed over the entire eastern half of the state (as well as parts of Montana, Idaho and Oregon). Triggered by the repeated building up and bursting of a colossal ice dam, they left behind deep deposits of sand, silt and gravel. Most of Washington's vines sit atop this geology, topped by thin layers of wind-blown silt and volcanic ash from subsequent volcanic eruptions.

"The Missoula Flood soils are deep-pretty spectacular for grapes," Long says. "They're well-drained, not nutritious." And they are rocky. Those seeking minerality in their wines can find it in Washington, often from vineyards littered with stone or layered with basalt.

The one downside to Washington's terroir is that winter freezes can damage, even kill, grapevines. If the temperature dips below -15° F for a few days, as it did in Walla Walla in January 2004, it can destroy the grape crop for the year. A killing freeze occurs on average twice a decade. Growers have learned how to minimize damage, but if it gets cold enough for long enough, extensive losses can still occur.

So many different varieties can do so well in these conditions that Washington has no single calling card, as Napa Valley has with Cabernet Sauvignon, New Zealand with Sauvignon Blanc and Oregon with Pinot Noir. Which horse should Washington saddle up? It's not an obvious choice.

Early on, Merlot emerged as a standout. At a time when California struggled to make exceptional wines from this Right Bank Bordeaux grape, Washington seemed to strike that deft balance of ripe fruit and sleek structure. Vintages from the 1980s and 1990s still feel fresh, and the best have gained complexity in the bottle.

But Cabernet Sauvignon-alone and in blends-has produced more great bottles than any other variety. The style seldom achieves the opulence of Napa Valley, but usually shows more intense fruit than a typical Left Bank Bordeaux. Flavors focus on ripe fruit, often with mineral and herbal accents. In the state's cooler regions those herbal flavors can veer into bell pepper and other vegetable notes. Washington Cabs have the acidity and balance to age well, as examples tasted from the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate.

Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Carmenère, the other Bordeaux varieties, play a role in Meritage-type blends and, increasingly, as solo acts.

Syrah makes wines that are full of character, generally earthier, more minerally and less opulent than California's or Australia's, but more centered on fruit flavors than typical Rhône wines. Blueberry, plum and currant flavors are common, often with layers of black olive. Although widespread Syrah production only arrived this decade, earlier bottlings have aged well for 10 years and longer.

The only thing holding Washington Syrah back is market resistance to the grape, no matter where it comes from. The wines are so good, however, that optimists expect things to

improve. Eventually, Syrah could well become the state's signature grape.

"For me, Washington state is the second-best place in the world for Syrah, after the Rhône Valley," says Spago's Miller. "I really do believe it's that amazing. I'll take it over [Australian] Shiraz or California Syrah any day."

The other major Rhône variety, Grenache, has not fared as well, perhaps because it needs a warmer climate than what Washington can provide. A few vintners blend it with Syrah or make a pleasant rosé from it.

Riesling was an early success. Ste. Michelle Wine Estates alone produces more than 1 million cases of Riesling today. Pacific Rim Winemakers (its website is RieslingRules.com) moved from California to camp near Washington's Riesling vineyards. Two famous German wine producers make Riesling here. The wines consistently develop ripe peach or apricot notes along with floral aromatics, while maintaining the grape's signature delicacy. The best versions age gracefully for five to 10 years.

Other aromatic grapes, such as Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon and Pinot Gris, can make charming wines with crisp textures and nicely delineated fruit flavors.

Chardonnay has sufficient fruit character to hold up to barrel aging and make moderately priced wines of balance and surprising depth. A few vintners have coaxed extra nuances to make wines of real complexity, and their numbers are growing.

Part of what distinguishes Washington is that the wines clearly reflect each grape's varietal characteristics. Cabernet Sauvignon tastes of cherry and currant, Merlot of raspberry, Syrah of blueberry, Riesling of peach, Chardonnay of pear and apple. If you like your flavors up front, Washington is your place. On the other hand, few whites other than Riesling can match the depth and complexity of the best from elsewhere.

Geography can frame flavors in distinctive ways, and Washington has a growing variety of regions and sites. The state currently counts 11 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), each producing wines with their own sets of characteristics.

Vintners employ differing approaches to the terroir in Washington. Only a few, such as Cayuse and Côte Bonneville, follow the estate model, with a winery in the same place as the vineyards.

Some producers, such as Chateau Ste. Michelle, own vineyards but also blend them with purchased grapes. Others prefer to get their grapes from a variety of sites and either bottle them separately or combine them into something they believe to be better. This would include top names such as Betz, Owen Roe, Gorman and Mark Ryan. A few vintners take it a step further; rather than bottle individual varietals separately, Andrew Will and Cadence simply blend the grapes from a single vineyard into a wine named for the vineyard instead of a grape variety.

Some 70 wineries make their wines in and around Seattle, nowhere near the vineyards. This group includes stars such as Quilceda Creek in Snohomish, Cadence and OS wineries near

Sea-Tac Airport, as well as Andrew Will, a ferry ride away on Vashon Island. The long-distance system works because harvesttime weather is cool enough not to harm the grapes during their approximately three-hour trip.

"Woodinville Wine Country," a cluster of wineries in a Seattle suburb more than 100 miles from the vines that go into the wines, owes its unique existence to these diverse approaches. Twenty minutes from downtown Seattle, Woodinville has some 50 wineries. Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia Winery are across the street from each other there; Novelty Hill and Januik around the corner; Betz, DeLille and DiStefano just down the road. In addition, 30 eastern Washington wineries maintain tasting rooms there.

Recently, a gaggle of small producers have set up shop in and around a warehouse complex across town. Several are among the rising stars, including Gorman, Efeste, Mark Ryan and Sparkman. They are all there for the same reason that the wineries that became Ste. Michelle and Columbia located themselves near Seattle—having a tasting room in an urban setting helps to sell the wine. More than 300,000 visitors stop by Chateau Ste. Michelle each year to hit the tasting room, wander its 85 wooded acres, or attend a summer concert on the lawn. (This year the lineup included Lyle Lovett, Chris Isaak, Steve Miller Band and Harry Connick Jr.)

"Woodinville is the closest wine destination to any major city," says Washington winemaker Bob Betz. "It takes longer to get out to the grands crus of Bordeaux than it does to get to Woodinville [from Seattle]." There is another reason: Many of the vintners just don't want to leave the city. Baseler remembers asking Wally Opdycke, who ran Chateau Ste. Michelle in the 1970s, if Opdycke decided to build the winery in Woodinville to attract tourism. "He said, 'Nah, I just wanted to live in Seattle,'" Baseler relates. Of such exigencies are traditions founded.

Washington had no real history of fine wine until the late 1970s. Until then, wineries sold mostly fruit wines from berries, cherries and apples, all of which, like grapes, produce remarkably pure flavors in Washington. The state grew plenty of grapes for grape juice, but the region was believed to be too cold for the likes of Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon.

But legendary vintner André Tchelistcheff saw the potential. In the early 1960s, Tchelistcheff, then the winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyard in California, tasted a few early experiments from Washington. In 1967 he signed on to consult with the company that eventually became Chateau Ste. Michelle. He remained a consultant for Ste. Michelle until his death in 1994.

In the 1970s, a group of forward-thinking growers, including Ste. Michelle, started planting huge vineyards in eastern Washington. Meanwhile, out in Walla Walla, a couple of Army Reserve buddies named Gary Figgins and Rick Small decided their homemade wines were good enough to sell. Figgins planted a 2-acre vineyard, founded Leonetti Cellars and made his first commercial wine, a Riesling, in 1978. Small soon followed, in 1981, with Woodward Canyon. Others jumped in, including L'Ecole No. 41 and Waterbrook. "It was like someone sprinkled mushroom spores to the wind," Figgins laughs.

About the same time, Clay Mackey left his family's home in a Napa Valley vineyard for "the pioneering spirit" he saw in Washington. As Ste. Michelle's vineyard manager, he learned

how to find the good sites, but he wanted his own business. "In Napa," he says, "I couldn't afford to buy a vineyard and start a winery." He could in Washington. In 1983, Mackey married Kay Simon, then assistant winemaker at Ste. Michelle, and together they opened Chinook Wines.

At the time, there were only a couple dozen wineries in the whole state. Yakima Valley, already growing juice grapes, was the first area to expand into wine grapes. Land around Pasco and Horse Heaven Hills came next. Riesling, Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon were the prime varieties, but Chenin Blanc, Sémillon and Lemberger were also widely planted. "All the growers in the state could meet in Preston's [Preston Wine Cellars in Pasco] tasting room," Simon recalls. "It was a like a private club. We all helped each other. You could feel the excitement because this new industry was making such good wines."

In recent years, other independent spirits added their voices to the chorus. Christophe Baron decided to plant Syrah on cobblestone-filled land in Walla Walla in 1997 and created Cayuse. Charles Smith parlayed his success with high-end Syrah at K Vintners into labels of well-made, moderately priced wines with names like Steak House Wine and Kung Fu Girl. Pacific Rim Winemakers arrived, believing that Riesling did best there. Owen Roe moved its winemaking from Oregon to Washington because the latter's Chardonnay, Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet exerted so strong a pull for winemaker David O'Reilly. Unfortunately, the 2010 vintage was made in Oregon when the winery in Sunnyside proved too difficult to maintain.

A roster of established international wine figures, starting with Piero Antinori of Italy and Ernst Loosen of Germany, brought different ideas and approaches to Washington-not on their own, but through partnerships with Washington wineries.

Allen Shoup, Ste. Michelle's CEO from 1980 to 2000, first approached May-Eliane de Lencquesaing, then owner of Bordeaux second-growth Pichon Comtesse de Lalande, in 1991 with the idea of a joint venture. "She loved our wines, but the family thought there was some kind of trick," Shoup recalls. "They said no." He turned to Antinori, who liked the Syrah and Cabernet he tasted in Washington, and within two weeks made a deal to start what became Col Solare.

"Ernie Loosen called about a month later," Shoup says. "He told me he believed there will be a renaissance of Riesling, but it would happen in the New World." That partnership became Eroica. Aside from creating a successful Riesling-only brand, Loosen consulted with the Washington winemakers on all of the company's Rieslings. Today, all the wines show better structure, more minerality and finer intensity.

When he left Ste. Michelle, Shoup started Long Shadows, which focuses on a portfolio of six wines made as joint ventures with Bordeaux-based consultant Michel Rolland, the Folonari family of Italy, Armin Diel of Germany, John Duval of Australia, and Randy Dunn, Philippe Melka and Agustin Huneeus Sr. of California.

Winemakers who earned their stripes at Ste. Michelle have also gone on to their own commercial and artistic success. Among the prominent spin-offs are Januik and Novelty Hill (Mike Januik was the chief winemaker under Shoup), Bunnell Family Cellar (Ron Bunnell was responsible for red wines at Ste. Michelle until 2003) and Fidelitas and Goose Ridge (Charlie

Hoppes ran the Canoe Ridge facility for Chateau Ste. Michelle). The biggest success story is Betz Family Winery. Bob Betz wasn't even a winemaker at Ste. Michelle—he was the company's research and education guru for 20 years. Today his Cabernets and Syrahs consistently rank among the state's best. "For years, the Washington scene was a bunch of entrepreneurial mavericks," laughs Betz. "We were snotty intruders when we started 30, 35 years ago. Today we are the elder statesmen."

As the oldest wineries turn operations over to the next generation, Washington has reached another stage of maturity. At Quilceda Creek (whose 2003 Cabernet ranked No. 2 on the Wine Spectator Top 100 in 2006), the wines have taken several steps up since Paul Golitzin assumed the winemaking duties from his father, Alex, in 2003, changing the vineyard mix and making the textures more inviting. And at Leonetti, where Figgins passed the baton to his son Chris, the winery no longer buys grapes from outside Walla Walla. Chris has also fine-tuned the winemaking to show less oak and focus on the vineyard characteristics. "You feel a resurgence of that same sense of enthusiasm we had," Mackey says.

As Betz traveled the world for Ste. Michelle, he learned an important lesson—that Washington has to embrace its quirks and unique characteristics if it wants to compete on the world stage. "To understand Cabernet Sauvignon you have to understand the dynamics of the Médoc," he asserts. "But we can't internationalize Washington wines. We have to write our own book." He gives as an example his efforts to tame the tannins in his Red Mountain wines. "I worked hard to reduce the astringency in Côte Rousse," he notes. "At the end of the day it's still a Red Mountain wine, but it's more pleasurable."

That kind of fine-tuning represents the next step for Washington, fewer than 30 years ago a sleepy backwater with scattered vineyards and a few promising startups. Today, it thrives with 682 unique wineries, 11 approved appellations and more to come of both. It has terroirs that excel with Riesling and Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and other Bordeaux varieties, and most definitely Syrah. Its practitioners eagerly try innovations that appeal to both collectors and neophytes.

Washington's vintners have covered a lot of ground over the past few decades, and judging by the rising quality of their wines, they are just getting started. Now wine lovers are catching on, and towns like Walla Walla are on the map for good.