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Quality High, Prices Low Strong vintages deliver the goods in Washington

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Washington has its share of iconic bottles that command big prices, but newcomers are making their mark, the best of them offering a rising tide of outstanding and in some cases classically proportioned wines. New or established, they all share Washington's signature attributes of pure fruit flavors that balance with moderate alcohol, acidity and tannins. Some rise into another realm, coaxing layers of complexity that make for compelling sips, often at very reasonable prices.

Of the more than 700 wines reviewed since my last report ("Washington's Rich Vein of Values Is Studded With Gems," Dec. 15, 2010), nearly half received outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. This group includes the current vintage of some of the state's most famous and collectible wines, such as the Quilceda Creek Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2008 (94 points, \$130) and Leonetti Reserve Walla Walla Valley 2008 (93, \$138). Other established names that excite aficionados include Cayuse and DeLille, as well as the reserve wines of Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Crest and L'Ecole No. 41.

At the very top, however, 11 different labels make up the 16 wines in this report that rate classic (95 or more points), with a half-dozen of them carrying price tags south of \$50. Even better, more than 100 of the report's nearly 360 outstanding wines sell for \$30 or less. For \$20 or less, you can choose from among 130 wines that scored 88 points or higher (including 32 that rated outstanding). And at the low end, you can get change for \$10 on 24 big-volume wines that are good enough to score 85 points or better. Along with rising quality among the state's best producers, Washington's reputation for delivering outstanding value remains strong. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Credit this bounty of outstanding wines to the excellence of recent vintages, especially 2007 and 2008. Mirror images of each other—with 2007 following its hot summer with cool harvest conditions, and 2008 ripening the grapes with warm weather in September and October after a cool summer—both years made wines that accurately represent the state's style.

At this point, you are likely to find more 2008 reds on retail shelves than 2007s (the older vintage having made up the largest part of last year's report), along with white wines from 2009 and 2010. In addition, the first important reds are trickling in from 2009, a vintage hindered by an early freeze on Oct. 11 while 15 percent of the grapes were still unpicked. It might have been worse if not for a very hot summer that led to an early harvest. Overall, quality and volume, though good, are a couple of ticks behind the previous vintages of 2007 and 2008.

With its northern latitude and a desert climate irrigated by the Columbia River keeping temperatures moderate, Washington seldom shows more than slight swings from one vintage to the next. The better years show more consistency across the board and elevate the best wines onto a higher plane. In that light, 2007 stands as the more consistent of the two, though both vintages rate in the classic range overall, with 2007 at 96 points and 2008 at 95 points. (See the vintage chart on page 104.)

"I love the '08s," says Brennan Leighton, winemaker at Efeste. "The wines didn't come out of the gate like the '07s, but they have the structure. They didn't show well early on, but like 1999 they can do well in the long run." Five Efeste wines rated outstanding or classic in this report, including its Syrah Yakima Valley Jolie Bouche Boushey Vineyard 2008 (95, \$36), a



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sharply defined and beautifully expressive red that packs an enormous range of flavors into a taut, savory jet of deliciousness.

That wine demonstrates what consumers find so great-and potentially so frustrating-about Washington. Each glass delivers all kinds of expressiveness. The price is a steal for a wine with such depth and distinction. But it's not easy to find, as Efeste could only make 385 cases of it. And that is pretty much the situation for all the state's top-rated wines, with most produced in quantities of fewer than 500 cases.

Jolie Bouche uses grapes from Boushey, a highly prized vineyard that divides its fruit among some of the state's best vintners, including Betz, Fidelitas and Sparkman. Not surprisingly, those three producers are among 10 labels that each contributed five or more outstanding wines to this report, underlining their consistency. The others? Gorman, Januik, K Vintners, Mark Ryan, Rasa, Owen Roe and Seven Hills.

Only one of the bottlings that reached the 95-point plateau tops 1,000 cases: the Baer Ursa Columbia Valley 2008 (95, \$35), another bottling offering eye-opening quality for the price. A blend of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Petit Verdot, the wine offers a dense cloud of blackberry, cherry and spice flavors that hover, almost weightless, over a sleek frame of fine tannins and just enough acidity to keep it fresh.

Since the death of founder Lance Baer in 2007 at 39, the winery has persevered in the hands of his father, Les, and sister, Lisa. Consulting winemaker Erica Orr has kept Lance's supple, mouthwatering style, which earned Ursa outstanding ratings in four of its past five vintages. "Erica was able to see what Lance had been doing," says Lisa, "and duplicate the idea, like a chef recreating a dish."

Baer is among the long list of small wineries, producing fewer than 2,000 cases annually, that are crowding their way into Washington's inner circle. Darby, Efeste, Fidelitas, Gorman, Mark Ryan, Pursued by Bear and Charles Smith Wines (a spinoff of K Vintners) have all shouldered their way into the top tier over the past decade. Also stirring interest among newer projects are Doubleback (ex-NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe's partnership with Leonetti's Chris Figgins) and Hestia (from a Seattle guy who discovered wine while playing rugby in New Zealand). (For these and other young wineries, see "New Faces in Washington Wine," on page 109.)

One of the state's most celebrated producers, Betz Family Winery, changed hands earlier this year. Bob Betz, who founded the winery in 1997 while still working at Chateau Ste. Michelle as its chief educator, sold it to South African Steve Griessel, who owns the private equity company Insync in Phoenix. Griessel and his family moved to Woodinville to run the winery, and Betz will stay involved for a minimum five-year transition.

The key parties are saying things that suggest they don't plan to meddle with success. "I spent the last couple of months documenting the DNA of this company," says Griessel, a longtime wine collector who knows his way around the business world. "It puts a system in place. Bob read [my report] and told me, 'You got us.' Bob can step in at any point, as far I am concerned. He just doesn't have to deal with all the details."

Five of Betz's seven current releases scored in the outstanding range, with the other two at 89 points. Leading the way is the intense Syrah Yakima Valley La Côte Patriarche Red Willow Vineyard 2009 (93, \$55), which is firm and spicy, offering smoky, tarry overtones to the flavors of blackberry and licorice that persist at the core. Like most of the Betz wines, it's not at all heavy, despite all that's going on, with a lovely transparency.

Although much of this tasting report centers on red wines, Washington makes white wines worth paying attention to. Of the 172 whites reviewed during the past year, 35 earned outstanding ratings, a respectable 20 percent. The top white, the DeLille Chaleur Estate White Columbia Valley 2009 (92, \$36), fermented its Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon in barrel to achieve rich, silky texture and layers of pear, orange peel, pineapple and fig flavors. Right behind it are more typically tangy, vibrant styles of Chardonnay, including the Chateau Ste. Michelle Columbia Valley Reserve 2008 (91, \$32), with flavors of pear and spice melding smoothly on the balanced finish. Among the state's light, fragrant Rieslings, the Pacific Rim Columbia Valley Biodynamic Wallula Vineyard 2009 (91, \$33) trips lightly as its pear, lime and floral flavors persist on the delicately sweet finish.

Washington's whites also tend to cost less than comparable-quality reds, and availability is better. It's easy to find wines such as Charles Smith's Riesling Kung Fu Girl 2010 (90, \$12), immensely appealing for its Winesap apple, apricot and citrus flavors, finishing with zing to balance the sweetness, or the Airfield Sauvignon Blanc Yakima Valley 2010 (90, \$13), which is juicy with grapefruit and herb flavors, finishing with pizzazz. The Columbia Crest Pinot Gris Columbia Valley Grand Estates 2009 (89, \$12) is crisp and lively, displaying flavors of grapefruit and spice.

At all points on the spectrum, Washington's wine future looks as bright as the fruit in these wines.

Editor at large Harvey Steiman is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Washington.

- [Harvey Steiman's Recommended Wines From Washington](#) *(in PDF Format)*