

It's hard to disagree with Ted Baseler,

president and CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, when he says, "These are halcyon days for Washington wine." While a few Washington wineries such as Chateau Ste. Michelle have been widely distributed for years and insiders have long coveted bottles from Leonetti, Quilceda Creek, Andrew Will, and Cayuse, only recently has Washington wine become a must-have item in restaurants across the country.

Chateau Ste. Michelle's dramatic Canoe Ridge Estate Vineyard in the Columbia Valley occupies a south-facing slope that drops down to the Columbia River.



Fifty Fast-Forward Years

Though wine grapes were planted in Washington as early as 1825, two events mark the beginning of the modern era of Washington wine: the founding of Associated Vintners (now Columbia Winery) in 1960 and André Tchelistcheff's consultation with Chateau Ste. Michelle beginning in 1967. Washington's early benchmark wineries, such as Quilceda Creek, Leonetti Cellars, and Woodward Canyon, were founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The grapes of the time were red Bordeaux varieties, especially Merlot, as well as Sémillon, Riesling, and Chardonnay.

Make Way for Washington

By Jake Kosseff



A period of rapid growth began in the mid-1980s with an explosion of new vineyards and wineries in the state. In 1989 the entire state produced only 40,000 tons of wine grapes from 9,000 acres of vineyards. By 2007 the numbers had climbed to 125,000 tons from 31,500 acres. During those same years the number of bonded wineries increased from 60 to 530, and despite the recent economic swoon, Washington's growth continues unabated.

As the vineyards expand, the grape plantings have shifted. Chardonnay still plays an important but declining role in Washington's overall mix, as does *Sémillon*. Riesling is on the rise, fueled by the success of *Eroica*, a joint venture between

Germany's Dr. Ernst Loosen and Chateau Ste. Michelle, and by Poet's Leap, a partnership between Armand Diel and Long Shadows, a group of international wine partners founded by former Chateau Ste. Michelle CEO Allen Shoup. Among red wines Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot predominate, but there has been a strong movement toward blending in other Bordeaux varieties—Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc—or bottling these wines on their own. Syrah has yet to claim its promised place as the Washington star wine, but as very young plantings mature, its potential for superstardom grows. Other Washington varieties on the rise are Grenache, Mourvèdre, Tempranillo, and all the white Rhône varieties.



Washington's American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) with year approved, acres of vines planted, and leading variety:

Yakima Valley	1983 11,000 of nearly 600,000	Chardonnay
Columbia Valley	1984 30,000 of nearly 11,000,000	Merlot
Walla Walla Valley	1984 1,900 of 340,000	Cabernet Sauvignon
Puget Sound	1995 130 of 4,576,000	Madeleine Angevine
Red Mountain	2001 710 of 4,040	Cabernet Sauvignon
Columbia Gorge	2004 300 of 4,432	Chardonnay
Horse Heaven Hills	2005 6,667 of 570,000	Riesling
Rattlesnake Hills	2006 1,500 of 68,500	Cabernet Sauvignon
Wahluke Slope	2006 5,200 of 81,000	Merlot
Snipes Mountain	2009 535 of 4,145	Cabernet Sauvignon

is Visit isantemagazine.com for more information about Washington's appellations.

Grape Heaven

Beginning in the eastern foothills of the Cascade Mountains and stretching nearly to Canada in the north and to the Idaho border in the east, the **Columbia Valley** American Viticultural Area (AVA) is by far the most important one in Washington. It dominates the state in overall size, acreage planted, and quality. Eight of the state's ten AVAs are contained within Columbia Valley's borders; they cover nearly 11 million acres and encompass 30,000 of Washington's 31,000 vineyard acres. (See the Washington AVA map, above.)

The area is a nearly perfect milieu for grapes, and though there are many distinct areas within the boundaries of the Columbia Valley, the similarities among them in geology and climate are striking. The appellation's geography and soil are a result of a combination of the Great Missoula Floods and volcanic activity from the Cascade Mountains. Throughout the last ice age, periodic releases of water from glacial Lake Mis-

soula caused walls of water hundreds of feet high to sweep across eastern Washington, washing away the region's topsoil and leaving behind huge rocks, gravel, sand, and silt. Under the silt lies fractured basalt from the Cascade volcanoes and sometimes gravel from the floods and ancient riverbeds. Many of the vineyards also count well-drained, nutrient-poor volcanic dust as a main component in their soils.

This vast expanse is also protected by the rain shadow of the Cascade Mountains and averages a mere 8 to 13 inches of rain each year. The dearth of precipitation helps reduce pesticide spraying to a minimum and means that irrigation is almost always a necessity. Water management allows growers to control the plants' growing cycles and take full advantage of the weather.

The annual temperature range is remarkably consistent throughout the Columbia Valley—nearly perfect for grape growing from the coolest areas on the western edge of the Yakima Valley to the hottest spots, such as Red Mountain. During summer, daytime temperatures regularly climb above 90°F, then drop significantly, often to below 50°F at night. This impressive diurnal temperature shift helps preserve the acidity and purity of fruit in the grapes, even as they are being coaxed to ever-greater heights of phenolic maturity.

The Columbia Valley more than makes up for any lack of accumulated heat with an extremely long growing season and an average of 17.4 hours of sunlight per day during this period. These conditions allow late-ripening red varieties to reach maturity for harvesting in the cool weather at the beginning of the fall. The combination of the long growing season, extra sunlight, and large diurnal temperature shift allows Riesling to thrive alongside red Bordeaux and Rhône varieties.

Winters in the valley are cold: temperatures drop below freezing for extended periods of time and occasionally dip below 0°F. These low temperatures can pose a risk of frost damage, but cold winters in combination with the sandy soil have kept the Columbia Valley almost phylloxera free. As a result Washington is one of the few major wine regions in the world in which a majority of vineyards are planted on their own rootstocks. When vines do suffer winterkill to the ground, the root survives and the vineyard loses only one year of production.



Above: Wineries have gained fame sourcing grapes from the celebrated Ciel du Cheval Vineyard in the Red Mountain appellation.

Appellation Tour: Growers Reign

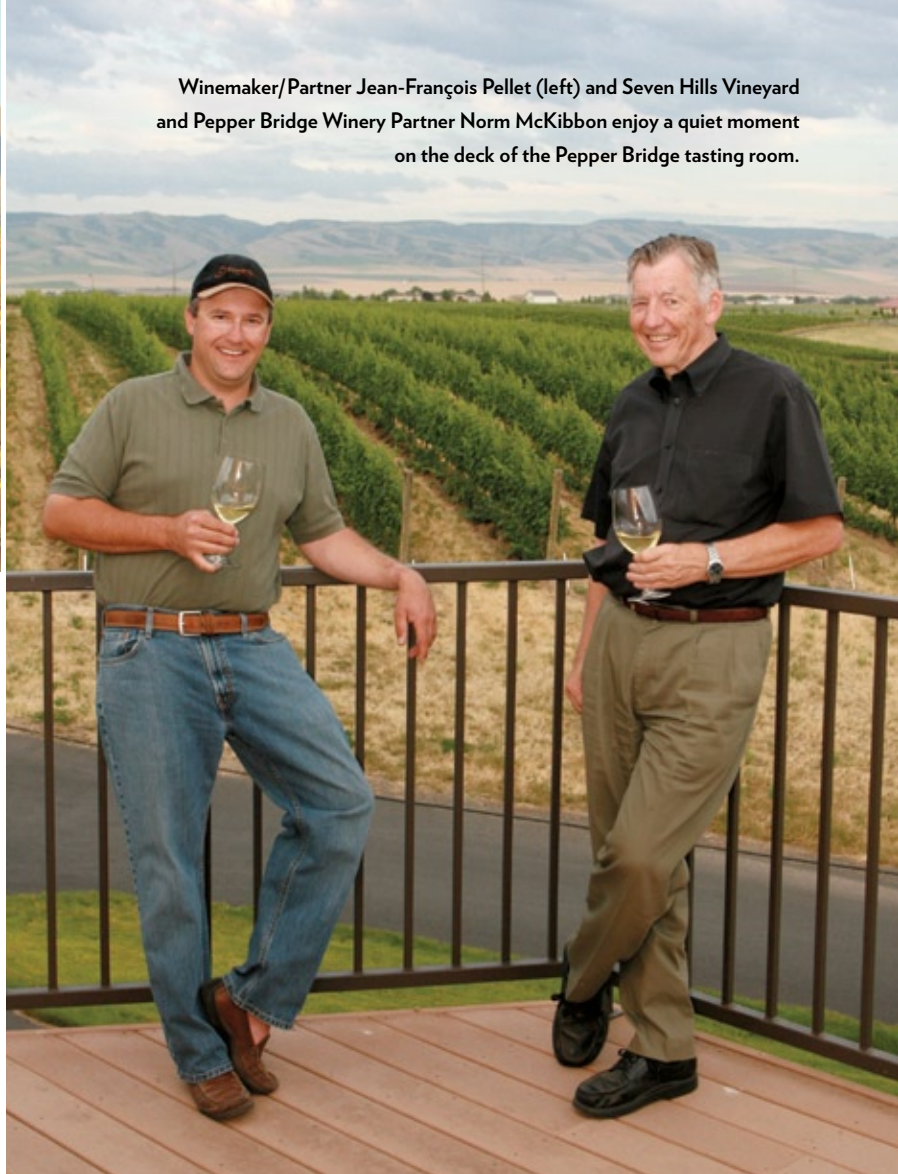
The Washington wine industry's rapid expansion has led to leading wineries sourcing quality grapes from established growers. Located in the **Yakima Valley**, Dubrul Vineyard is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Syrah, Cabernet Franc, and Riesling. Kathy Shiels, who owns the vineyard along with her husband Hugh, notes, "Warm days, cool nights, and our [south-facing] slope ensure optimal ripeness even in cool years. Acidity and bright fruit [are] assured by the chemistry of the soil."

Syrah is rooted in more than one-third of Boushey Vineyards' 100 acres in the Yakima Valley; red and white Bordeaux and Rhône varieties populate the remaining acreage. Dick Boushey attributes the success of the vineyard to "age—both mine and the vineyard's. After almost 30 years . . . we both know our limitations."

Brothers Butch and Jerry Milbrandt farm 1,600 acres of grapes in the Columbia Valley, including 800 acres within the **Wahluke Slope** appellation. The acreage is spread over 13 separate sites, but producers sometimes label a wine as simply Milbrandt, and the brothers' Milbrandt Vineyards label features wines from all of their vineyards. Butch Milbrandt cites the reasons that drew the brothers to Wahluke Slope: "First, the reputation of the early growers. Then the poor soil quality and the hot weather, which are driving factors in premium-quality grapes." Some of the Milbrandts' outstanding sites in the appellation are Clifton Hill, Sundance, and Northridge Vineyards.

Paul Champoux of Champoux Vineyards, located in the **Horse Heaven Hills** AVA, points out, "The wind plays a significant role in amount and strength compared to the other [Washington] AVAs. We are at the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge . . .

Winemaker/Partner Jean-François Pellet (left) and Seven Hills Vineyard and Pepper Bridge Winery Partner Norm McKibbin enjoy a quiet moment on the deck of the Pepper Bridge tasting room.



where the wind starts and rushes to the Columbia Basin. But wind can be a good thing . . . as the enemy of mildew and bunch rot, and in that it creates thicker skins for protection that also increase flavor." Of the vineyard's 180 acres, 100 are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and 30 to Riesling. Syrah and other Bordeaux red varieties cover the remaining 50.

Vineyard owner Patricia Gelles notes that grapes from Klipsun Vineyards on **Red Mountain** have "a tremendous amount of structure, so the wines last for decades, to the point where a little bit of Klipsun fruit added to the blend goes a long way." Though Cabernet Sauvignon dominates the plantings, there is also Merlot, Syrah, Malbec, Nebbiolo, Sauvignon Blanc, and Sémillon.

Ciel du Cheval Vineyard, also on Red Mountain, is divided between Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Sangiovese, and an assortment of other Rhône and Bordeaux varieties. Jim Holmes, who owns the vineyard with his wife Patricia, comments, "In the wine business we like to pretend that we know just what kind of terroir leads to great wine. In reality the wine tells the whole story." The wines from Ciel are concentrated and bright, with equal parts fruit and structure, and a distinct sense of place.



Washington On-Premises

Chris Miller, wine director at Spago Beverly Hills and the 2008 Chaîne des Rôtisseurs International Best Young Sommelier, is a fan of Washington wines. He recently found a few minutes in his busy day to answer some questions about Washington wine.

Jake Kosseff (JK): How do Washington wines fit into your wine program?

Chris Miller (CM): They've really started to take a more substantial presence on our list. Our selections over the past year have grown from two wines to two pages.

JK: What are the main strengths of Washington wines?

CM: [They are] beautifully new-world-styled but structured wines with copious fruit balanced by smooth tannins and

good acid profiles. The prices are still relatively low compared to the overall market.

JK: How do Washington wines compare in quality to similarly priced wines?

CM: They offer an incredible quality-to-price ratio. The "bang-for-the-buck" quotient is extremely high, and Washington has some really interesting wines, especially the Rhône-style and Cabernet-Syrah blends at ridiculously inexpensive prices.



A favorite pairing for Chris Miller is "[Washington] Riesling, which has gotten so much better the last few years, with Toro sashimi or Thai-style prawn dishes."



Visit isantemagazine.com for Jake Kosseff's complete interview with Chris Miller.

Seven Hills Vineyard, in the **Walla Walla Valley** AVA, is planted primarily to Bordeaux varieties and Syrah. Norm McKibben, of Pepper Bridge Winery, who owns the vineyard in partnership with Gary Figgins of Leonetti Cellars and Marty Clubb of L'Ecole No. 41, attributes the quality of Seven Hills' fruit to a variety of factors: "An average of 8 inches of rainfall, allowing us to control the vines with irrigation; consistent wind that adds a small amount of stress; sustainable farming featuring compost made on-site; a very experienced viticulturist and long-term employees; and a strong desire by the owners to produce very high-quality fruit." Of future expansion McKibben offers, "The partners have developed 1,500 acres of ground bordering [Seven Hills] Vineyard. . . . SeVein Vineyards will [nearly] double the grape acreage in the Walla Walla Valley."

Burning Bright

The future is unpredictable, but a reversal of Washington's soaring wine fortunes seems remote. Some new cash-poor wineries and established midsized producers may fail during the current economic crisis, but as existing vineyards mature

and as more of the enormous amount of potential vineyard area is developed, the quality of Washington's wines will improve. Increased vineyard density will result in a better understanding of the specific grape-growing areas within eastern Washington. Continuing success will drive interest and investment to the region, further accelerating the already breathtaking expansion in wine quantity and quality.

Harder to predict is which of the new wineries will become the future benchmarks of the region. With such choices as Abeja, Cadaretta, Corliss Estates, Gramercy Cellars, K Vintners, Pacific Rim, Pepper Bridge Winery, and Waters Winery, the only sure thing is that there will be many excellent Washington wineries vying for attention. In the past, filling out a Washington section on the list was a challenge; now the test lies in limiting the number of selections.

:: reviewer's choice ::

Turn to our Food, Wine, and Spirits Review for Jake Kosseff's reviews of Washington State wines.

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