

## Washington: Consistent Quality, New Stars

What strikes me most about Washington State wines (as a visitor from afar) is how consistent Columbia Valley vintages are. The high desert climate, control of the water supply through irrigation, and the near absence of harvest rains are all factors in lack of vintage variation. This is not to say that vintages don't matter; the principal variable from one year to the next is heat. The years 2003, 2004, and 2005 can be characterized as "warm" years, 2006 and 2007 less so. There seems to be a consensus that 2007 was an ideal vintage but it's just a bit too soon to say. Certainly 2006 is an excellent to outstanding vintage (most of the red wines in this report are from that year). To Washington's producers, these differences are significant. To an outsider not so much. I cover Oregon where no two years are alike, each having its own distinctive personality and personality quirks. Those are variations that truly make a difference. In Washington I occasionally have the opportunity to participate in vertical tastings. I am almost always struck by the consistency from year to year and the absence of truly bad years. Over a period of 20+ years one can see how styles have gradually changed, farming has improved, and how certain grapes have come into favor at the expense of others but, to me, Washington's story is about consistency. The obvious lesson for consumers is to learn who the top producers are. With this knowledge, you can buy a wine from a favorite winery from almost any vintage with a very high expectation that it will be to your liking year after year after year.

Based on what I've just said, you might think that covering Washington is boring. Not so, because the region is bustling with newcomers. Washington just registered its 600th winery. There are 42 wineries in the town of Woodinville alone. When I made my first wine tour of Washington in 1990, I visited all 42 wineries that were operating in the entire state. Walla Walla had four wineries in 1990, now there are over 100. In short, the fun part of covering Washington is discovering the new stars (and there are plenty). Here are some names worthy of consideration: Adams Bench, Cadence, Corliss Estate, Efeste, Gorman, Gramercy Cellars, Grand Rêve, Mark Ryan Winery, Maryhill, Rasa Vineyards, Sheridan Vineyard, Sparkman Cellars, Syncline, and Waters. When talented, motivated people get to work with high quality Washington fruit, amazing things can happen.

— *Dr. Jay Miller*