

The Wines of Washington State: Part Two

Written by Terry Connor
Wednesday, 15 February 2012 10:24

I would like to present a discussion of the wines of Washington State that concentrates on the leading varietals. These varietals are a mix of red and white wines. As best as I am able to determine, the leading varietals are (red) Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah.

The white varietals are Chardonnay and Riesling. Ninety percent of all the grape varietals grown in Washington are grown east of the Cascade Mountains in the Columbia Valley. The other 1% is found west of the Cascades in the Puget Sound AVA. AVA's east of the Cascades are Walla Walla, Yakima Valley, Rattlesnake Hills, Snipes Mountain, Red Mountain, Horse Heaven Hills, Wahluke Slope, Lake Chelan, Columbia Gorge, and The Columbia Valley. They are concentrated along the Columbia River and follow the river north to The Lake Chelan AVA.

Kerry Shiels is the owner of DuBrul Vineyard in Washington. He has been quoted as saying, "We grow a lot of things well here in Washington." His statement says it all. Where else are you able to find 32 different types of grapes growing so successfully in such a concentrated area as the Washington AVAs? Add to this the fact that grapes were planted in addition to apples, cherries, wheat, and pears. (Notice I said that grapes were in addition to and not to replace any existing product)

Washington's first star was Merlot. This was in the 1980s and 1990s. Long-term aging was no problem as the product that was bottled continued to gain complexity and structure. The next star was, and is, Cabernet Sauvignon. As a product produced from a single grape or a blend, this varietal has produced more great bottles than any other grape. The styles focus on intense, ripe fruit; and mineral and herbal accents.

The third star Red from Washington is Syrah. Syrah was introduced in Washington by the Columbia Winery in Woodinville, Washington. Woodinville is near Seattle. The Syrah Grape is very compatible with the weather and soil and so it made inroads competing with Zinfandel. Zinfandel was very established and remains so; however it is forced to coexist with the new – and really popular – kid, Syrah. Syrah is very food-friendly and robust. You may consider firing up the grill when enjoying a bottle with dinner. For us here in the Lowcountry, Washington State Syrah should be available from most retailers at around \$20. Look for Syrah to be more available as it gains in popularity.

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I toured a good sampling of the Washington State Wineries in 2009. I must have tasted 30 different Chardonnays. A Robert Parker type I am not, therefore 30 was enough. After so many tastings, the flavors start to come together. I really wanted the experience of tasting the wine, as the Chardonnay from Washington carries its own characteristics. The grapes are from clones developed at The University of California-Davis for the Washington "terroir". This allows winemakers to maintain levels of acidity that balance the fruit and flint flavors of the Chardonnays from the Washington AVAs. I was not disappointed as I picked up rich flavors of pear and apple.

Riesling grapes are fairly easy to grow and do well in many climates. Washington State has warm sunny days and cool nights that are just what the doctor ordered for Riesling grapes. Washington State Riesling delivers classic Riesling flavors of peach, pear, melon and subtle mineral notes. Serve with Lowcountry Shrimp.

I thought it might be interesting to illustrate two extremes in bringing certain varietals to market. The first is high volume. Two companies, Chateau Ste. Michelle and Hogue Cellars, together produce approximately 2,700,000 cases per year. Chateau Ste. Michelle is owned by a tobacco company called Altria. Hogue Cellars is owned by Constellation, an International wine giant. The magic that occurs here is DISTRIBUTION. Both wineries produce excellent wines at all levels, from the \$15 per bottle all the way up to the reserve categories in the \$70 range and up. They possess the means to create terrific wines and to get their products to market with the minimum of hassle; even to us folks here in the Lowcountry.

The other extreme is low volume production. Two wineries, Leonetti Cellar and Cayuse Winery are excellent examples. Leonetti was started in 1978 with 200 cases of a Cabernet-Merlot blend. Since then he has increased his annual production to 5200 cases. Why so small? It is because of a personal philosophy to dedicate the annual production to growing and marketing wine of world class quality. Mr. Figgins accomplished this through making small amounts of ultra- high quality handcrafted wines. He has no plans to increase production and he sells only to a mailing list which now has a FOUR year waiting period. The winery is open to the public one weekend per year. Call his wine a cult wine if you choose to, however his style of production set the pattern for other wineries to copy. Cayuse Winery, my other example, is much the same. Christophe Baron, the owner of Cayuse, has an annual production of 4600 cases. His waiting list is estimated to be six years. My point here is that the vintners all pay close attention to quality and sustainability no matter what level they produce at.

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Next stop? I think Franco wants to go to Texas. Next issue I will have written articles for one year. Let me know how I am doing.

WINESPEAK

If you are able; try to obtain a copy of the WINE SPECTATOR, December 2010 issue. Harvey Steiman wrote a very comprehensive article on the Wines from Washington State. The article is one to keep. It was a great help to me.

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