

Washington State is home to 700-plus wineries. Fewer than 20 of them are high volume producers. The best example is, of course, Chateau Ste Michelle. Others include Hogue, Columbia Crest, Barnard Griffin, and Waterbrook. These wineries have nationwide distribution with good representation in the Lowcountry. (My personal favorite is Waterbrook.) The remaining wineries have production that is low volume, and unless we go to Washington State, we are unaware of their existence.

It wasn't until in the 1970's that wine in Washington started to take on any significance. Until then, it was cherries, apples and other produce. In a whisper of time, wineries began to dot the surface of the Washington landscape. Now, barely 40 years later, some 700-plus wineries have established themselves, all producing quality Merlot, Cabernet, Chardonnay, Riesling and Syrah. In order to accomplish this feat in such a short period of time, the sun, moon and stars had to be in proper alignment, i.e. plenty of cash available for development, good weather, a labor force, an abundant supply of patience, and let me not forget the all-important ingredient called SALES. It happened and the rest is history. It is an absolute pleasure to tour and taste in Washington. I have yet to be disappointed.

Now that we have established that we are in Washington, I want to take a closer look at Syrah. (Bill St. John is a wine writer for the Chicago Tribune. The following paragraph is his: The word "Syrah" probably came to us from the Ancient Romans and the city of Syracuse. The Romans, expanding their empire further into France, placed some settlements in what we now call the Rhone. The soil and climate were perfect for the Syrah grape. Somehow the fruit found its way to the west coast of the United States; first in California and then into Oregon and Washington. 20,000 acres of Syrah are planted in California and 3100 acres in Washington. The soil and climate in Washington is a perfect host for the Syrah Grape. The excellent quality of the grape will surely be the reason for more plantings. Syrah, like the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot for which Washington State has been famed, enjoys the state's extended hours of sunlight as it develops flavor compounds and deep pigmentation that grapes at lower latitudes simply cannot imitate. Furthermore the significant day-to-night swings in temperature (sometimes up to 40 degrees) help Washington grapes retain acidity, something to be wished for in a red wine, both for texture and refreshment and for aging potential.

One very important point to remember here is that Syrah produced on our west coast is a Rhone Style Wine. A Rhone-Style wine is merely an imitation of wine from the Rhone Region. The Syrah grapes in Europe and the United States are all related in some way as the wine produced in Washington State is also Rhone Style. The primary grape in the northern Rhone is

Syrah. Travel to the Southern Rhone and we find that one of the principal grapes in Chateau Neuf du Pape is Syrah.

I was going to try to mention some food pairings for Syrah. Not being a cook I had to refer to the cookbooks. The possibilities are endless so let me just try a few. Remember that the wine is hearty and robust. Therefore we want to match the wine with hearty and robust foods. We could try a lamb casserole mixed with sausage and smoked ham. There are several chili recipes that I saw. Whiskey grilled baby back Ribs, Filet mignon with a rich balsamic glaze, slow cooker roast beef and on and on and on. No matter what, a most admired writer, Karen MacNeil points us in the direction of the Grill. She suggests that Syrah and Zinfandel underscore the flavor of grilled foods best and further suggests that Syrah, with its earthy flavors would go well with Duck or grilled lamb.

WINESPEAK

It has been said that The Northwest United States is the new frontier when it comes to wine. That may be so as the region has been producing wine in a large scale for only 40 years. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay were the early champions of the land. In a seamless manner along comes Syrah to take its rightful place in the spotlight. This is a good thing. On Tuesday of this week I spoke with a couple of winery owners. They have the utmost respect for the growers of Cabernet or Chardonnay or whatever. It is just that the Syrah producers feel that the time is right, the soil is ready and the public is ready to accept a high quality Syrah. Oh, by the way. I also inquired on when we might see some in the Lowcountry. The response was: "be patient. We are definitely working on it."

Happy New Year!