



The International Wine Review

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Report #38: The Wines of Washington State

Introduction



The Yakima Valley

In little more than three decades, Washington State has become America's second most important producer of premium wines. It produces well-crafted wines made from grapes sourced

from 13 different AVAs, mostly in the Columbia Valley, located in Eastern Washington, and boasts almost 800 wineries and 44 thousand acres (18 thousand hectares) of wine grapes, double the vineyard acreage of its neighbor to the south, Oregon, but just a small fraction (8%) of California's acreage¹. At the same time, it has diversified its plantings, discovered promising new grape varieties, and won critical plaudits for quality. However, Washington wines are still an enigma to many out-of-state consumers. Educating consumers about the unique terroir and quality wines of the state is one of the goals of this report.

Washington is unique in many respects. Its northerly latitude gives it longer hours of sunlight during the growing season and cool temperatures at harvest time, allowing for long hang times and ripening with good acidity. Infertile soils of loess and alluvial deposits over a basalt rock base provide good drainage and an inhospitable medium for phylloxera, allowing for self-rooted vines unique to North America. A very dry climate and relatively abundant water supplies permit regulated irrigation to control yields and produce richly flavored fruit. André Tchelistcheff recognized these unique features when he produced some of Washington's first single varietal wines for Chateau Ste. Michelle in the late 1960s.

¹ Washington's wine grape acreage is about the same as that of Napa County alone.

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Compared to other American wine-growing regions, Washington winemakers do a lot of blending. They mix different varieties to make excellent Bordeaux and Rhone blends. They also blend fruit from different vineyards and appellations, both to gain complexity and richness and to minimize the risks of frost damage, which often seriously affects only selected sites.

Washington is also unique in the structure of its wine industry. A single firm—Ste Michelle Wine Estates (SMWE)—has dominated the industry, both in terms of plantings and production. Fortunately, the enlightened, corporate management of SMWE has had a long run perspective, resulting in research and experimentation that has raised the quality of Washington wine overall and, equally important, given it national exposure. Today, the industry embraces dynamic change, with over 500 new wineries created just since the year 2000. New winemakers and new estate vineyards are experimenting with new varieties, making new wines, and deepening and broadening the structure of the industry.

Introduction

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There have been many pioneers of Washington wine, including first and foremost, Dr. Walter Clore. In this report we discuss the pioneers, both old and new, as well as recent innovations in growing grapes and making Washington wine. We also discuss the diverse AVAs and the grapes and wines they produce. The principal grapes—Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Riesling, Chardonnay, and newly planted varieties—are discussed along with their wines. We tasted over 500 Washington State wines for this report; our evaluations of these wines are given in the Tasting Notes and Ratings section of the report and are also available on-line. We conclude that Washington State is producing some of the country's best wines, especially, Bordeaux Blends, Southern Rhone varieties, and Riesling. In addition, Washington premium wines offer good value, usually priced below the domestic competition.

The future looks bright for the wines of Washington. Numerous new, often small, family-owned wineries are building on the established base of highly respected large, commercial and boutique, up-scale wineries. While most wineries still purchase their fruit from large, established vineyards, increasing numbers are also planting their own, estate vineyards. And the number of wineries located close to their vineyards is increasing.

However, challenges remain, albeit more on the marketing than the production side. Many of the newly marketed wines have limited distribution, while the well-known boutique wines have long waiting lists. Marketing is a major challenge facing Washington wine, both in terms of consumer recognition of what's special about the wine and in terms of consumer access to the product. This makes the marketing activities carried out by the Washington State Wine Commission and other AVA-based, marketing boards in the State especially important.

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