

Washington

4 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Pure, vibrant, well- made varieties.

Main grapes: Chardonnay, Riesling (white); Cabernet, Merlot, Syrah (red).

The state of Washington in the far Pacific North West is the US's second most important producer of wine made from European vinifera vines (New York is still primarily a producer of wines with less mainstream names and flavours).

Most of the vineyards are far from Seattle in the under- populated Columbia Valley, in the rain shadow of the Cascade Mountains and in severe need of irrigation. Plantings therefore tend to be limited to the reach of river water and to slopes which protect vines from the area's particularly harsh winters, which have killed a substantial proportion of vines every few years. The Yakima Valley is the chief, very dry wine zone but a nucleus of top wineries such as L'Ecole 41, Leonetti, Northstar and Woodward Canyon are based in the small town of Walla Walla, which lends its name to a small AVA. Columbia Valley is a common AVA here and encompasses practically every other one such as Rattlesnake Hills, Horse Heaven Hills, Wahluke Slope, Red Mountain and even Columbia Gorge well to the west, which straddles the Oregon border and the all- important Columbia River – allowing producers to keep their blending options fully open. Many of them buy from the same growers.

Some vines have also been planted in the completely different, relatively wet, mild climate of western Washington, however.

A high but decreasing proportion of eastern Washington wine is vinified or at least aged here in the Seattle area, miles from the Columbia Valley vineyards. The Washington wine business is dominated by one large company, Chateau Ste Michelle, which also owns such labels as Columbia Crest and Snoqualmie. They are also in cahoots with Erni Loosen of the Mosel, making Washington Rieslings which have rejuvenated the entire varietal category in the US, and with Piero Antinori, making Col Solare Cabernet.

This is not boutique lifestyle winery country but there are several extremely dedicated individual producers. DeLille, Hedges, Quilceda Creek and Andrew Will have already established an international reputation. Newer producers making waves include Basel Cellars, Cayuse and K Vintners, many of them concentrating on Syrah rather than on Bordeaux red varieties. There are many refugees from more precious California wineries to the south - though little close contact with the neighbouring Oregon wine industry.

Although Cabernet Franc is better at withstanding winter freeze, Merlot has shown itself particularly well adapted to the hot, dry summers of western Washington, while Cabernet Sauvignon can be stringy and austere thanks to its late ripening and the Washington winter's early arrival. In fact Washington had demonstrable success with Merlot long before it became fashionable in California (it is a natural habit to compare everything in the Pacific North West wine with the dominant state to the south). The wines are generally supple, attractively fruity but with good, crisp natural grape acidity, often preserved by cool September nights.

But Washington is probably more distinguished from its competitors as a producer of fine white wines, of all degrees of sweetness. Chardonnay is now, perhaps inevitably, the most planted variety and winemakers generally show good craftsmanship with it, but the aromatic varieties Riesling and, to a lesser extent, Gewurztraminer can also be deliciously pure here. Washington appears to be one of the few wine regions of the world to take Riesling relatively seriously, and even styles itself a Riesling specialist. Semillon can also be distinctively attractive, with some plumpness but Sauvignon- like aromas.

See the [Washington Wine Commission](#) for more information on this region.