

A celebration of dirt, wind, sun and bravery in a bottle

When talking to a winemaker about Washington wine grapes, it's best to follow these rules of thumb: "Never after midnight" and add "Never-ever pre harvest."

What could be a brief but engaging conversation will, after midnight and just before harvest, turn into a verbal love letter. Beer will disappear, pizza boxes will empty and there's a high probability that one winemaker will multiply into a few. Be prepared for a lesson on geology, history, soil chemistry, weather and horticulture. Be prepared to stumble away with a thorough understanding about brix, ph and destemming.

As harvest nears, winemakers become grape-obsessed and make the trek to the rocky slopes of Eastern Washington's vineyards to taste (and test) in the rows. Wineries can reserve blocks of vines that catch the light just so and drain the spring rains in just the right way. When it is at last warm enough, delicate leaves will unfurl with the help of tiny winged angels dancing to the sound of heralding trumpets – or so it is described by a winemaker at 1AM.

Washington, the UN of Grapes

As any vineyardist will tell you, the life of a grape vine is not one of pleasure-bound leisure in a verdant eden of arbors. To coax out the best fruit, the vine must struggle a bit and toughen up in order to stand against the glare of the sun. Its roots must seek nutrients in an obnoxiously hard ground. It must survive threats like insects, wilt, rot and powdery mildew. Within a few short months, a vine is expected shake off a harsh winter, thrive and produce fruit by the tons.

As if to add insult to injury, any exuberance of growth the vines might show in the summer is pruned without apology. Buoyant clusters of Syrah fall to the ground in order to bestow light, air and nutrients on other, more preferable clusters. Each varietal, be it a Riesling, Sémillon, Merlot or Mourvèdre requires its own special combination of natural hardships and rocky ground – elements that Washington's grape growing regions are delightfully prepared to doll out.

What makes Washington Wine unique is the number of varietals growing in their ideal environment. Take a quick trip to Woodinville and become acquainted with an astounding Bordeaux blend, a silky Nebbiolo and a sparkling wine all grown and made in one state. The signature grapes of Italy, France, Spain, Germany and Austria all do very well here.

Enter the heroes

An absent-minded sip of Cabernet Sauvignon from Red Mountain will grab you by the wrist and pull you into the glass – there you will taste the long days of sunlight and the cool breeze that wicks the heat off of the small dark berries that can't afford to bake too hot for too long. The soil and the specific way it has formed the Red Mountain AVA is a benefit of an ancient natural disaster – the Missoula Floods. While this very small area has produced incredible

grapes, it was not immediately apparent that the overlooked slopes of Red Mountain were good for much other than growing cheatgrass.

Four hours north in the high desert of Chelan, a plummy, complex Tempranillo opens minds. Chelan's high altitude and dry air suit Tempranillo, a grape that doesn't grow everywhere and certainly doesn't grow everywhere well. It's not an obvious choice to grow Tempranillo in an area known for its apple orchards, but it is an educated one.

In the Columbia Valley, micro climates thrive like rabbits in a warren – there are so many that just about anything is possible. It is likely that you'll meet hard scrabble, mineral-loving varietals like Albariño as easily as a river-life-loving Marsanne. There is not one varietal that stretches across the land, but many that nestle in small blocks. These are grapes grown to outshine in quality rather than to march en masse into the bins.

Who does that? Who bothers with just an acre of grapes? Who decides that a patch of land where killdeer scuttle back and forth is suited for Tempranillo? Who would pick up a handful of gritty earth and think that in a few years, it might produce some pretty ok grapes?

The brave Washington Winemaker, that's who.

Terroir as it lives and breathes

Making wine employs creativity, skill, technical knowledge, a strong back and the nerves of a mountain goat. At best, it is a process that involves a lot of cleaning, lots of beer, sleepless nights and early mornings. At its most intense, it involves great leaps of faith, a couple of broken fingers and stories that are retold for decades.

Washington wine's greatest single quality is the gutsy band of people who have chosen to grow wine grapes and make wine here. Very, very good wine. Even in the face of all the variables that get thrown at them.

One wildfire will change the course of a winery's year. An early summer hailstorm will crush the hopes of even the most accomplished winemaker. But year after year, Washington winemakers take the risk and use what both nature provides and vineyard workers coax. From a great amount of skill and a touch of guile rises a smoky field blend; a gloriously dry rosé; a late harvest dessert wine that will never be made again—because the circumstances of will never be the same.

Standing alongside the tried and true award-winners are the once-in-a-life-time characters. Don't miss your chance to taste them. Any of them.

The party is getting bigger by the moment

Washington State Wine Guide 2014

While the Yakima Valley AVA is celebrating 31-years (established 1983) of being the center of Washington's wine universe and Walla Walla and Columbia Valley AVAs turn 30 (established 1984) wine in Washington still has the air of a relatively young industry.

There's an excitement to be found in little one room wineries and palatial chateaus across the state. It's the adventure of tasting a new release and returning to coveted favorites.

Newest to the scene is hard cider. Just as varied as wine, Washington State wineries and cideries are producing astounding, lovely and memorable bottles. Textures and flavors of these ciders range from silky and sweet to effervescent and dry. It's the perfect addition to the ever evolving world of Washington wine.