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The Wines of Washington State Revisited

Double Issue

Rise of Red Varieties New Faces Top Vineyards 500 Wines Reviewed

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Introduction

The wines of Washington State are among the best in America. The second largest producer of premium and super premium wines in the country, Washington's wine industry is especially dynamic with 350+ vineyards, 950+ wineries, and 55 thousand acres of vines. In this report we explore its progress on many fronts since the publication of our last report *The Wines of Washington State* in 2013. In that earlier report we documented the development of Washington wine and its diverse growing regions, important grape varieties and sophisticated growers and winemakers. In the current report we put special focus on the rising stature of Washington wine, its new growing areas, talented new winemakers, growers' adaptation to warmer weather, and the growing dominance of red grape varieties, especially Cabernet Sauvignon. We also explore the changing wine market and the state's role in raising the visibility of Washington wine at all price levels in the US and foreign markets.

Noteworthy progress has been made in the short time since our last visit to Washington wine country. The number of wineries continues to grow at an exponential rate. Established producers are expanding their operations into new growing areas in search of unique terroir and planting grape varieties ideally suited to that terroir. While producers continue to source fruit from outstanding growers farming world class vineyards, they are also increasingly planting estate vineyards. They're also responding to a seemingly unquenchable thirst for Cabernet Sauvignon and planting more of it relative to the industry's former signature varieties, Riesling and Merlot.

Essential background information on Washington's geography, soils and climate is provided at the outset of

this report. We note that Washington's northerly latitude gives it long hours of sunlight during the growing season and cooler temperatures at harvest time relative to California, allowing for long hang times and ripening with good acidity. Infertile soils of loess and sand and pebble 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. While there is an increased risk of drought in parts of the state due to a warming climate, we also note how growers are adapting to climate change.

The core of this report is an in depth examination of Washington's grapes and wine styles. Over half of all new plantings are to Cabernet Sauvignon, so it's not surprising that Cabernet and Bordeaux blends are a majority of the wines evaluated for this report. Washington winemakers do a lot of blending of varieties, vineyards and regions to gain complexity and richness, and we're especially enthusiastic about the state's red blends. Washington also continues to be the country's most important producer of Riesling, and while consumer demand may be cooling for this variety, the quality of Washington's Riesling is better than ever. Rhone varieties, especially Syrah and Rhone blends, also show great promise, particularly those from the Walla Walla Valley and the Rocks District of Milton-Freewater.

Next, we take a look to the future. We profile the research and training programs at Washington State University's Pullman and Tri-Cities campuses that provide the knowledge base for the future and the new faces of the industry that provide the talent. We look at the state's strengths as well as the challenges it faces in marketing wine, especially market visibility that's not commensurate with the size of its industry and quality of its wines. We end with a look at the important marketing activities of the Washington State Wine Commission designed to raise the visibility of Washington wine at all price levels.

The final section of the report includes winery profiles and tastings notes and ratings on almost 500 Washington State wines. Based on these evaluations, we conclude that Washington producers are crafting outstanding premium and super premium wines that are a step up from those reviewed several years ago, vintages notwithstanding. It is a great testimony to the progress being made by Washington State's wine industry.

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