

Against All Odds: Washington State's 2020s and 2019s

BY ERIC GUIDO | MARCH 02, 2023

Winemakers in Washington State are full of energy and enthusiasm. Very rarely do I witness so much positive attitude visit after visit, or a willingness to experiment tirelessly, to think outside the box, or reinvent the box altogether. In nearly all cases, winemakers here are humble yet proud, open to accepting criticisms and willing to admit mistakes. As for camaraderie, they have that in spades. I do not find the cynicism or willingness to undermine their neighboring winemakers I see elsewhere. It's quite the opposite. Here ideas are shared freely; there's a conscious belief that the success of one means the success of all. As a result, the entire region benefits, even through the significant challenges of recent years.



The Sagebrush block in the WeatherEye vineyard.

Winemaking in the Extreme

Some of the most beautiful mountains imaginable lie east of Seattle. Barren stretches of land and highways emerge on the other side, instilling a sense of utter loneliness. This is not a place to run out of gas or blow a flat. The reality is that nearly all of Washington State's vineyards exist in a climate most accurately described as a desert, a rain shadow created by the Olympic and Cascadian Mountains. With this comes extreme heat, vintage after vintage seeming warmer than the one before, as well as severely dry conditions from the lack of rain, only five to seven inches a year on average. Vineyards couldn't exist here without irrigation, fed by one of the state's most precious natural resources, the Columbia river. Another challenge of Washington winemaking is the cold weather. The region's location and exposure to arctic air masses mean that vines can, and often will be, destroyed by severe frost, not just in the spring but also in the fall, dangerously close

to harvest. Now add to the mix wildfires that blanket the vineyards in smoke, interrupt ripening and, in the worst-case scenario, possibly taint the wines. Phylloxera? Washington has that too, and it's a serious issue. Just as California had to suffer through large replantings in the 1980s and 1990s, we see it here now in Washington State.

However, the region continues to grow, its terroir continues to impress, winemakers continue to push the envelope, and Washington State continues to prove that it can create world-class wines on a scale larger than ever.

Of course, winemakers here also have several things going for them. Diurnal shifts ranging from 35 to 47 degrees on average help maintain balanced acidity within the grapes despite the heat. Eastern Washington's extremely dry but windy conditions help ward off disease. Their free-draining loess soils are ideal for the use of well-timed irrigation. The amount of sun exposure means easier ripening in the right conditions. And of paramount importance is the lower cost of land versus, say, Napa or Sonoma. This offers the ability to expand within the existing AVAs allowing a winemaker to grow their portfolio and be creative with a mix of interesting varieties beyond the region's most popular, which includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. Ultimately, that same pricing also means wines from Washington State can be much more affordable to the end consumer without sacrificing quality.

A Sense of Place

Going back to 2005, when I started getting acquainted with Washington State wines, this region was built on producer first and location second. The greater Columbia Valley AVA covers over 11 million acres. Columbia Valley, along with its nested Yakima AVA, a large and diverse growing location spanning 19,000 acres and Walla Walla Valley AVA at 319 thousand acres, were the three most referenced AVAs. At the time, Red Mountain had just started to gain momentum, and the Horse Heaven Hills had just been officially registered. Over time, these two locations would prove to be amongst Washington State's most notable terroirs. The Horse Heaven Hills, a rather large AVA, remains the source of the state's benchmark Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot blends. The highly regarded Champoux Vineyard, made famous by producers such as Quilceda Creek, Andrew Will and Woodward Canyon, lies within it. Red Mountain, a much smaller AVA at just 4,500 total acres, has become one of Washington's most notable terroirs, producing gutsy reds that push the ripeness envelope. It's also the home of one of the state's most exciting experimental vineyards, WeatherEye (more on that later). However, over the next 14 years, the region added only seven AVAs, which, while important on their own and clearly identifying individual terroir, went largely unnoticed by many consumers. The seven AVAs since 2005 in the order they were created are: Rattlesnake Hills, Wahluke Slope, Snipes Mountain, Lake Chelan, Naches Heights, Ancient Lakes and Lewis-Clark Valley.



Barrel aging at the Force Majeure winery, located on the Oregon side of Walla Walla Valley.

Starting in 2020 and continuing to this day, everything has suddenly changed. The state has added six AVAs, with another two currently pending. Royal Slope, Candy Mountain, The Burn of Columbia Valley, White Bluffs, Goose Gap and Rocky Reach are now part of the greater Columbia Valley AVA. With this sudden growth has also come speculation from winemakers regarding the importance of each individual terroir. Yet, I believe this just to be growing pains in a region that has existed so long with such large swaths of vineyards to work with. The fact remains that the majority of conversations I had regarding terroir during my recent visit in the fall of 2022 had more to do with The Rocks District, a sub-AVA within Walla Walla Valley, set on the Oregon side of the border, and the new WeatherEye vineyard, located on Red Mountain.

Experimental Is the Name of the Game

The highly experimental yet wildly successful WeatherEye vineyard has captured the attention of many winemakers in the region. Consumers are sure to follow. The vineyard, spread across the ridgeline of Red Mountain, is managed by Ryan Johnson, who also planted it. Johnson was previously in charge of Ciel du Cheval and co-founded the Force Majeure. Since 2016, 33 acres have been planted, broken down into 60 micro-parcels that use a combination of variety, terroir and vine training, including dense plantings and northern exposures to offset the region's heat. The native biodiversity that existed throughout the vineyard remains fully intact, with vines alongside rabbitbrush and sagebrush, adding a distinctly savory note to the wines. Putting my nose into a fermenting crush of Sagebrush vineyard grapes at Sleight of Hand cellar, I detected notes of bouquet garni wafting up from the tank. Producers who have already begun to take advantage of this project include a who's who of Washington wine, such as Betz Family Winery, Valdemar Estates, Latta Wines, Sleight of Hand, Kobayashi Winery, Liminal Wines and, of course, the WeatherEye Vineyards estate winery, which has taken on Todd Alexander (think

Force Majeure, Pasxa, The Walls and Bryant in Napa Valley) as their winemaker. Stomping through vineyards, digging in the dirt, learning vine training and what thrives in each location is a regular activity on my travels, but this is a visit I will never forget.

Digging in the Rocks

The duality of Washington State wine couldn't be more clearly emphasized than when looking at The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater AVA (an incredibly long name to place on a label most often referred to as just "The Rocks"). When the average consumer thinks of Washington wine, it's the blends of primarily Cabernet and Merlot that compete with the wines of Napa and Bordeaux that come to mind. Unfortunately, many top wines produced today have nothing to do with either variety. The Rocks District and the wines from it couldn't be more different from those made throughout most of Washington State.

Adding even more confusion to the situation, The Rocks District is located entirely within the Walla Walla Valley AVA yet lies on the Oregon side of the valley, with a terroir drastically different from Walla Walla's loess soils. The vineyards are entirely in Oregon, but the majority of wineries that make wine from this district are in Washington State. By law, only a winery located in Oregon can produce wines from The Rocks, listing its AVA, yet anyone on the Washington side can use the Walla Walla AVA instead and reference The Rocks in some creative way. As a good example, the work that the renowned Cayuse Vineyards did over the years shined a spotlight on the terroir of The Rocks while continuing to use Walla Walla on their labels.



There's a reason they call it "The Rocks". This is the Cinsault block in the SJR Vineyard.

Today, the number of Washington wineries sourcing from The Rocks is on the rise, and with good reason. When the AVA was first established in 2015, only 205 acres were planted to vine. That has more than doubled as of 2022, with 500 acres now

under vine. According to Steve Robertson of Delmas Wines, "within the next handful of years (based upon my intimate knowledge), we will broach 650 acres. Voila...we are the size of Côte Rôtie!" Exactly. Think of comparing the Northern and Southern Rhône to Bordeaux in France. Not so coincidentally, the varieties that excel throughout The Rocks District are those of the Rhône (Grenache, Syrah, Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne). The wines producers craft with those varieties today are nothing short of magic. In my opinion, while Washington will always be primarily about Bordeaux blends, especially from a location and production standpoint, over time, I do not doubt that The Rocks District will emerge as one of the United States' most respected and exalted wine-producing regions. Why? Because the wines don't just speak of place, they shout it from the glass.

The 800-Pound Gorilla in the Room: The 2020 Vintage

Touring the region in the fall of 2022, the expectation was that most producers would be looking to show their 2020 releases, but surprisingly, visits and larger format tastings were filled with significantly more 2019s. Only 173 2020s were presented throughout my tastings, a much lower number than I anticipated. Are some producers deciding not to show this vintage with the idea that it may sell better without words and scores from the press? Or, did others decide not to estate bottle at all? Readers who follow Washington wines have heard the stories regarding 2020 and the extreme effects of the smoke that blanketed the region. The wildfires that spread across the western seaboard smoked out the Columbia Valley to the point of delaying ripening through September and, in many cases, imparted smoke taint into the wines.

One of the most notable public statements made in the region was from the Betz Family Winery, sharing that they wouldn't bottle any of their 2020s out of fear of smoke taint. While most producers respect this decision, others speak of how it hurt the entire industry for the vintage. In the case of smoke taint in wines: it's sporadic and difficult to fully detect if it's not obvious on the nose and palate, or even through chemical testing. Moreover, it can begin to show in a wine years after bottling. Jason Gorski, Director of Winemaking at DeLille, explained how one fermenting vat would show smoke while another wouldn't show any, even if the fruit from the two vats were from vineyard locations in close proximity. Brennon Leighton of House of Smith had a totally different perspective, commenting, "2020, I think, is the best vintage Washington has ever had." Leighton was happy to put 15 of his 2020s in front of me. He went on to explain, "it was the most even throughout...I was able to pick my fruit, phenolic-wise, with low sugars and high acids. I felt like everything was really healthy out there and vibrant." At the time of my tastings, I could not find any smoke taint in the bottles he showed me. However, smoke affected some varieties more than others, such as Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, and to my taste, Malbec. Tasting broadly, it was less about finding smoke, ash or medicinal notes in wines (the most common indicators of taint) but more about finding wines that felt dull, restrained, almost desiccated, as if they had been somehow manipulated or filtered.



Fractured basalt (volcanic rock) just below the soils of the Seven Hills vineyard at 1,200 feet.

When you take the smoke out of the equation, the **2020** vintage was shaping up to be a decent year for Washington State with a timely spring bud break, yet uneven bloom, and a warm early summer. July and August saw several heat spikes, followed by a warm September and October, and finally, an October frost on the 25th that brought the harvest to an end. This was also the smallest vintage (per tons crushed) since 2011, a result of frost and poor flowering, and that doesn't even consider the 17 thousand-acre increase in vineyard planting that took place over that same time period.

In the end, consumers must be very picky when choosing 2020s to place into their cellars. While we would like to think that the most respected producers wouldn't bottle a tainted wine, we have to consider that others may. Don't get me wrong, out of the 170+ wines that I've tasted from 2020, there are many that I would highly recommend. I also wouldn't skip buying the wines from my favorite producers, as I'm a big fan of buying the producer first and the vintage second. But heed my warning and proceed with caution.

Looking Forward to 2021

Sexy, suave and racy, the 2021 vintage will be interesting to follow as the more important wines of the year begin to be released. The question is, will they be balanced? This is one of the hottest vintages on record, neck and neck with 2015. What's more, after the small harvest of 2020, Washington State growers had yet another low-yielding vintage to deal with, with tonnage up by just 1% from the previous year. This was offset to some degree more by white varieties than reds.



The Figgins vineyard.

With early bud break, bloom, veraison and harvest, the 2021 vintage was advanced from nearly all standpoints. The year started with a dry winter giving way to bud-break in March, followed by a week of extremely cold, sub-freezing temperatures at night. Hot, dry winds plagued the region through May during flowering. With June, came a warming trend, resulting in a period of brutal, record-breaking heat at the end of the month, with temperatures reported as high as 118 degrees throughout the Columbia Valley for four days straight. While temperatures did come down, August remained quite warm throughout. The continued heat reduced berry and cluster sizes. According to the Washington State Wine Commission, Cabernet Sauvignon was the most affected, with a reduction of 30% below average tonnage harvested. The saving grace of the vintage was the cooler temperatures that lasted through September and October; this allowed the later ripening red varieties to regain balance. The most surprising aspect is how the grapes retained acidity despite the record-breaking heat, which is a big part of what makes the early releases so pleasurable.

All of the wines for this article were tasted with growers and winemakers in Washington State during the month of October 2022 and in our New York City Offices through November 2022.