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Washington's All-Star Vineyards

By Paul Gregutt



Through a combination of good terroir and hard work—and perhaps a bit of luck—these vineyards are producing great wines vintage after vintage.

A defining moment for any emerging wine region is when specific vineyards are recognized and sought after by winemakers, wine sellers and knowledgeable consumers. In Napa, Martha's Vineyard was among the first to become iconic. Oregon, following in Burgundy's footsteps, has made a fetish out of its pricy, single-vineyard Pinot Noirs. Now it's Washington's turn to put the spotlight on its

most favored soils.

What makes the grapes from a specific vineyard desirable? Simply put, it is their ability to express terroir. In other words, to demonstrate that these grapes, grown in this place, offer something both distinctive and desirable in terms of aroma, flavor and ageability. To do so requires a rare combination of hard work, talent, good fortune—and time. Though Washington is widely perceived as a very new wine region, it has numerous vineyards well into their fourth decade, and wineries that can show 20 or more vintages, more than enough to demonstrate ageworthiness.

Washington, in fact, can claim some of the nation's oldest Cabernet Sauvignon vines, planted as much as a half century ago. Because they were never threatened by phylloxera (which cannot survive the cold winters), they have outlasted almost everything in California.

In each of Washington's most productive AVAs there are vineyards that are emblematic and time-tested. I could easily name 25 or 30 that could qualify for star status, but in choosing just four I have looked for well-established sites that sell grapes to some of Washington's best wineries. All are frequently used for vineyard-designated bottlings, generally of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah. All have shown over decades that they not only reflect, but to a large degree exemplify, the specific flavors that characterize their AVA.

In short, these are all-star vineyards whose name on any bottle of wine is a reliable indication that you are drinking some of Washington's finest.

Ciel du Cheval (Red Mountain AVA)

Jim Holmes pioneered viticulture on Red Mountain in the mid-1970s with then-partner John Williams. Holmes knows more about that blessed stretch of dusty desert than anyone alive. The partnership split amicably in 1994, and their original vineyard is now part of Kiona's holdings. Ciel du Cheval, purchased in 1991, belongs exclusively to Holmes, but in a larger sense it belongs to the (roughly) two dozen winemakers who work with him to explore its vast potential.

Ciel du Cheval ("horse heaven," so-named because it looks out on the Horse Heaven Hills) captures everything that

is great and unique about Washington grape-growing. Alex and Paul Golitzin (Quilceda Creek) thought so highly of its fruit that they planted their own Galitzine vineyard on an adjacent 20 acres, a joint venture with Holmes. So did DeLille Cellars. Nearby is the new \$6 million Col Solare winery and vineyard. It's no accident that Ciel fruit has mesmerized, then magnetized, some of Washington's best winemakers, ultimately drawing in the Antinoris of Tuscany. It has a flavor profile unduplicated anywhere else.

Wineries as diverse as Andrew Will, Cadence, McCrea Cellars, Seven Hills and Soos Creek have made Ciel du Cheval vineyard-designates; many others use the fruit in their prestige blends. Twisting the arm of Holmes to experiment as widely as possible with new plantings has become an annual rite, and small blocks of Roussanne, Viognier, Mourvèdre, Counoise, Grenache, Nebbiolo and Brunello-clone Sangiovese have recently joined more substantial plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Syrah.



Jim Holmes of Ciel du Cheval

"We are massively, basically planted to Bordeaux grapes," Holmes explains. "But one couldn't ignore the Rhône if you've had a great bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape—you've got to plant some! Then you find out there's 13 different varieties there. And the love of Sangiovese and Chianti and Brunello is another seduction. But we're quite willing to tear out the losers. The biggest problem so far is there haven't been any losers."

The vineyard, which covers about 120 acres, sits a bit farther east and higher up the hill than Kiona and Klipsun, Red Mountain's other iconic sites. Ciel, which has some of the mountain's most shallow soils, is better protected from the fierce winds that can hammer the western slopes. This in turn helps keep the tannins in check, allowing a distinctive, gravelly minerality to underscore the fine-tuned, high-acid fruit flavors.

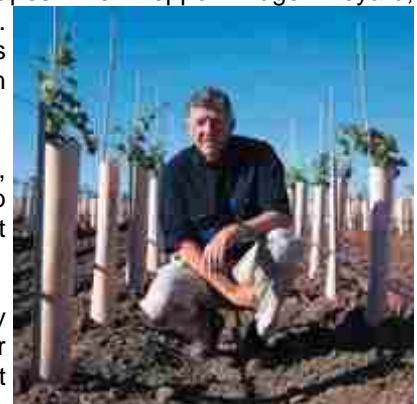
Pepper Bridge (Walla Walla AVA)

Though Walla Walla was officially granted AVA status in 1984, it had almost no vineyards within its boundaries, and those few acres were mostly located in Oregon. That didn't prevent the pioneers—Leonetti Cellar, L'Ecole No. 41, Waterbrook and Woodward Canyon—from building a world-class reputation, using grapes brought in from the broad Columbia Valley.

It took Norm McKibben and his partner Bob Rugar to fill in what was missing—grapes. Their Pepper Bridge vineyard, purchased in 1989, was originally an old wheat ranch south of Walla Walla. McKibben, who had already begun a vineyard (since defunct) north of town, was eager to try again in the new location. In 1991 the partners put in five acres each of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Those first grapes," McKibben recalls, "went to Rick Small (Woodward Canyon), Chris Camarda (Andrew Will), Gary Figgins (Leonetti Cellar) and Marty Clubb (L'Ecole No. 41). That kind of marketing got people to notice Pepper Bridge. At the time, there were only about 40 acres of grapes planted in the whole valley."

Today, the Pepper Bridge plantings include 162 acres of bearing vines, mostly split between Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, with 11 acres of Syrah and smaller amounts of Sangiovese and Malbec. The Pepper Bridge winery, though it contracts for some of the grapes, is a separate venture, with different partners.



Norm McKibben of Pepper Bridge

The vineyard is a relatively low elevation (hence cold) site, and it can take a beating in the freeze years (most recently 2004). But McKibben and vineyard manager Tom Waliser now bury canes (a means of quickly regenerating shoots following a freeze), and use soil sensors to read moisture levels and control vigor. The vineyard is a leader in sustainable farming practices, manufacturing its own compost and patiently rebuilding soil that was virtually sterile from a century of wheat farming.

Pepper Bridge winemaker Jean Francois Pellet, who came on board in the late 1990s, predicted that it would take him at least five vintages to learn the vineyard and to properly show its terroir. Now into his eighth vintage, he is on track to reach that goal, though the 2004 freeze set him back a year or two.

At Pepper Bridge, black cherry is a dominant characteristic, with the fruit ripe and sweet and broadly displayed across the mid-palate. "I'd like to think that my grandkids will thank me some day for the quality," McKibben proudly admits. "The vineyard is where we're going to increase our quality the most; and that is largely a function of rebuilding the

soil. It's expensive and in the short term it doesn't immediately pay for itself. We've definitely put more money back into the vineyards than we've spent buying the land in the first place."

Champoux (Horse Heaven Hills AVA)

The Champoux (pronounced "shampoo") vineyard occupies an unremarkable spot in the Horse Heaven Hills, on the southern edge of the Columbia Valley. It sits well back from the river, and boasts no wide-open vistas. It was originally a tiny slice of a vast agricultural farm known as Mercer Ranch. In 1972, a few acres of Cabernet Sauvignon were planted in a corner that the water system wouldn't reach. Those old vines are now worth their weight in gold.



Paul Champoux of Mercer Ranch

Though Mercer Ranch produced some memorable wines, it wasn't until vineyard manager Paul Champoux and his partners purchased it 11 years ago that its reputation soared. Over the years, substantial new plantings have increased the total acreage to 175.

A little over half is Cabernet Sauvignon planted at various times between 1972 and 1997. Riesling and Chardonnay make up half of the rest, and Merlot, Cab Franc, Syrah, Lemberger, Muscat and a couple of acres of Petit Verdot are also in the mix. Vineyard partners, who own and manage their own blocks, include the Andrew Will, Powers, Quilceda Creek and Woodward Canyon wineries. (Quilceda Creek's rare and much-sought-after Merlot is mostly from Champoux fruit.) In addition, many vintners, such as Sineann's Peter Rosback, make vineyard-designated Champoux wines.

Paul Champoux is generally cited as one of the very best vineyard managers in the state. He strongly believes in using cover crops and compost to build soil that is "alive and active" in pursuit of nutritional balance. The program works—more than two dozen winemakers are on his client list, and more would be if they could get in.

Champoux flavors are somewhat variable, depending upon which grapes, which blocks, from which plantings are used. The old vine Cabernet is remarkable: muscular and dense, authoritative and showing especially ripe, rich tannins.

"I shoot for my flavor to be developed between 25 and 25.5 brix," says Champoux; "more than that and there is an alcohol problem." He modestly says he has "a good vineyard site, not a great vineyard site. When to harvest is between me and the winemakers, based on going out and tasting together. If the whole plant is nutritionally healthy, that's what develops the flavors. That is what has made my vineyard stand out."

Boushey (Yakima Valley AVA)

Driving a dusty truck through the heart of the Yakima Valley on a warm spring day, grower Dick Boushey stops frequently to let his hounds run free. They sprint after prairie dogs, which seem to be everywhere in the vineyards.

As Boushey explains things, it's not the prairie dogs that damage the vines. But since the nearby cattle ranchers have hunted down the coyote population, which used to keep them in check, the badgers have moved in. "They're fearless," he says ruefully. "They dig huge holes that you can fall in. Sometimes I think we're losing the battle out here."



Dick Boushey

Boushey is not losing the battle as far as winemakers are concerned. His grapes, particularly Syrah, are crafted into exceptional wines such as La Serenne (from Betz Family) and Grande Côte (from McCrea). Both are powerful wines, that come as close as any Syrahs made in America to the expressive combination of smoked meat, cured ham, black truffle, charcoal, pencil lead and smoke that you find in the Rhône.

Like the other growers profiled here, Boushey is a tireless innovator. He began planting wine grapes "experimentally" in the late 1970s, slowly expanding as new wineries emerged. His vineyard holdings now cover roughly 80 acres, with a focus on new clones from Bordeaux and the Rhône.

"To me the ideal situation is you own the vineyard and the winery and manage both together to create the wine that you want," notes Boushey. "But Washington has a different dynamic. I'm

hands-on, and I like working with smaller wineries. I like to have them feel that they actually own that vineyard. Most are small and located on the west side (Seattle area) or in Walla Walla. Having a secure source of grapes is critical to their operations.”

It's a bit odd that in the Yakima valley, Washington's oldest AVA and home to a third of its vineyard acreage, there are relatively few estate wineries whose wines live up to their potential. By working with top boutiques, it is the independent growers—Boushey, Mike Sauer, DuBrul and others—who best demonstrate what can be achieved when the right clones are planted in the right areas.

“We want to grow the best grapes we can,” Boushey concludes. “I'll do anything people ask—within reason—if it makes good viticultural sense. I'm trying new things all the time. We've adjusted crop loads, changed canopies, we've dropped fruit just before harvest, changed watering regimes...”

Boushey grapes are an important part of many blends that use their higher acids and crisp definition to provide a firm spine to grapes from warmer sites. Look for both Syrahs and Merlots, and you'll find bright color, Bing cherry flavors and fruit that is fully ripened at moderate alcohol levels. Among the top wineries that feature Boushey fruit are Betz Family, Chinook, Delille, Doyenne, Fall Line, Forgeron, Long Shadows, McCrea, Three Rivers and Wineglass Cellars.



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