

Viewpoint

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Washington's Strengths Are Diversity and Value

By Marty Clubb

The highly competitive state of the wine market has producers from every region of the globe searching for their own varietal niche. For Oregon it's Pinot Noir. In Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon. New Zealand, Sauvignon Blanc. For a growing region as diverse as Washington's Columbia Valley, hanging our collective hat on a single varietal is a challenging and questionable proposition. Some industry insiders have criticized Washington for not being identified with a single variety (*"Washington Wines Seek Identity," wine-sandvines.com Headline, March 30*), but they miss the point. Washington's strength is its diversity, not its specialization.

Initially Washington followed the pull to define itself with a single grape. In the 1980s Riesling was the rising star, then the 1990s brought us Merlot, then Cabernet Sauvignon, more recently Syrah and now Riesling again. It worked, in a way, because we grow all of these grapes well. Despite this, Washington will never be a simple, single-varietal wine region—nor do we want it to be. The sheer diversity of wines in Washington is exceptional and key to our long-term identity and growing success. As an industry, that is the story we need to tell over and over.

There is also a lot of conversation about value, of which Washington has plenty. However, the concept of value is far different than price. I would argue that Washington wines deliver strongly on value, the perceived sense that what is being delivered outweighs what was paid for it. However, Washington will not likely compete on bargain pricing, not with our relatively low yields. Washington wines tend to show

beautiful balance, freshness, buoyant fruit, nice acidity, integration and elegance. With all these deliverables, Washington's value and quality index is high. Ultimately Washington will succeed in developing a broad perception of quality, across varietals, and at nearly every price point.

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Washington is the second-largest wine-producing state in the U.S., with 655 wineries (according to WinesVinesDATA) producing 10 million cases of wine. The single-largest producer, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, produces 60% of this volume and has built Washington's growing reputation. Amazingly, the top 10 companies produce 95% of all Washington wines. This means that the number of Washington brands distributed through traditional channels is small, creating challenges in cementing an identity and reaching broader awareness. This will change as the industry continues to grow.

San Francisco Chronicle wine editor Jon Bonné is a fan of Washington wines, writing, "Washington wine's best attempt at creating an identity has been a spiritual kinship with Bordeaux. Cabernet, Merlot

and Cab Franc tend to manage size and finesse, a mix of weight and grace. These are serious, complex wines." I think Bonné is close to the mark here, although I wouldn't limit our potential to Bordeaux varietals.

Our success at achieving this broad perception of quality and value ultimately rests in our unique combination of geology, climate and viticulture. This "perfect climate for wine" (a Washington Wine Commission trademark) is close to accurate but bruised by a periodic hard winter. Ironically, the hard winters contribute distinctiveness in Washington wine by forcing the vines into a deeper dormancy and more intense annual life cycle that rebounds by delivering more natural varietal flavor and character.

At 46°N latitude, we have more than 17 hours of daylight during the peak growing season. This means intense summer sunshine, a grapevine photosynthetic paradise. In the rain shadow of two large mountain ranges, eastern Washington is dry, tilting control over canopy balance and fruit weight into the hands of the winemaker. Our soils are glacially ground, geologically young, full of complex minerals and underlain by one of the world's largest basalt flows—a dual delivery vehicle for more earth tones and mineral attributes.

The long-protracted fall and daily diurnal temperature swings build structure and yet retain a higher level of natural acidity, the backbone of any great wine. Unusually, we grow on natural rootstock capable of delivering more vibrant fruit flavors with a larger conduit of nutrients and minerals. These attributes and growing conditions translate into consistent vintages of well-balanced and high-quality wines.

Like every great growing region around the globe, Washington's success is tied back to its vineyards and the diversity of the landscape that allows us to grow a variety of grapes exceedingly well. This, coupled with the tremendous price-to-quality ratio of the wines, will ultimately prove to be the reason that consumers reach for bottles of Washington wine.

Marty Clubb is managing winemaker and co-owner of L'Ecole No 41. He is also managing partner in Seven Hills Vineyard in the Walla Walla Valley. Clubb is currently president of the Washington Wine Institute and board member of WineAmerica.