

L'ECOLE NO.41

EASTERN WASHINGTON is not the sort of geography that inspires one to say, “Ah, wine country.” It has a Big Sky beauty that is certainly haunting, but it is also terribly austere. Say good-bye to the trees, for instance, as you make your way down the Eastern grade of the Cascades. You won’t see more than a handful until you hit the Rockies. It’s simply too dry. Face it: Any place that has ‘scablands’ as one of its geological features has got to be suspect as a viable agricultural region.

And yet Eastern Washington is viable. In fact, for growing things, summers in Washington are absolutely magical (and winters can be absolute hell, but we’ll get to that). The combination of prodigious summer heat and copious summer light makes the region one of the most bountiful on earth.

Still, there are some wineries that are even ahead of this curve. L’Ecole No. 41 is a *W&S Winery of the Year* for its third year running, and if anything, winemaker Marty Clubb seems to be getting more confident, more attuned to the peculiarities of Walla Walla, here in Big Sky West.

Clubb moved to Washington with his wife Megan to see if they could take back their lives from corporate careers (Megan worked in corporate banking; Marty worked for Bechtel). They decided to head back and run the small winery that Megan’s father, himself a banker, had founded out of an old schoolhouse building in Lowden, a town with a French heritage that accounts for the name of the school.

Marty Clubb had a lot to learn, but he also had several great fields



of inspiration, namely the two seminal vineyards of Walla Walla, Seven Hills and Pepper Bridge. (These two vineyards are also linked by their original owner and Clubb’s partner, Norm McKibben, truly the *emince grise* of the region.)

Seven Hills is one of the largest and oldest vineyards in Walla Walla (though its oldest block is a little more than a tenth of its current 200-acre size). It is on a long north-facing bank of what was once an ancient lake, one that arrested the forward movement of a vast and violent flood long enough to capture its mineral payload before it washed into the Columbia. That cataclysm, augmented by deposits of wind-blown loess, defines Walla Walla.

Pepper Bridge, meanwhile, is situated near the bottom of that former lake, with flows of alluvial soil from the nearby Blue Mountains. Each offers a unique terroir and Clubb is lucky enough to draw from both. “In barrel, Seven Hills [cabernet] is very showy, with all of those spicy, leathery, red fruit aromatics. Pepper Bridge has a lot less topsoil [than Seven Hills]; beneath the mantle of loess, the vines make it through the windblown stuff into the flood deposits; and the wine’s a little harder at first; it’s the beefier wine. We release it later.”

Just in time for us to rave, apparently. Apogee is a 100-percent Pepper Bridge bottling that displays the essence of the vineyard, giving off some of the beef tea and sundried fruit aromatics that you’d find in the best Walla Walla bottlings, while possessing a depth and density of texture that feels distinct and authentic. (Next year, you can compare it to ‘Perigee,’ Clubb’s new reserve from 100-percent Seven Hills fruit.)