

—GRAPE
ESCAPES—

Have Wine, Will Travel

It's time to discover Washington's
distinctive oenological taste.

BYOND THE CAR WINDOWS ROWS OF GRAPES—syrahs and cabernets to the left, a dense canopy of concords to the right—merge in a viridescent blur. The Yakima Valley's fertile scent, which is ripe with grapes and mint, carrots and hops, pervades the car. At this moment, the concords are all-consuming. It is as if the heavens are making jam.

Welcome to Washington. Apples and cherries may be the best-known local crops, but the state actually ranks second nationally in premium wine production.

The first grapevines were planted at Fort Vancouver in 1825, with wine grapes taking root in Walla Walla in 1860. By 1914, the first commercial vinifera grapes were planted at Snipes Mountain deep in the Yakima Valley, and by 1934, the first iterations of what is now Chateau Ste. Michelle, the oldest continually operating winery in the state, were born. Commercial-scale plantings appeared by the 1960s, and over the years, across the state, Washington cultivated a powerful and delicious wine industry—one that is now more than 750 wineries strong.

The wine may be competitive; the culture is decidedly not. Here, winemakers share secrets—with each other, and often with those who love their wine. It's nothing to find yourself suddenly drawn out of a tasting room and into the cellar, where a winemaker will regale you with chemistry while barrel tasting you on the next vintage.

The state also offers serious terroir, an essence you can taste in the glass. Geography, climate, and a violent geological history—volcanic eruptions, colossal lava flows

By **JULIE H. CASE** Photographs by **ANDREA JOHNSON**



WALLA WALLA

Heat rises consistently during long summer days for ideal ripening, and diurnal shifts send temperatures cascading during the wee hours, so grapes retain acidity.

that covered the earth in basalt, glacial floods that deposited sand and silt full of quartz and mica—are part of what give these grapes such character.

Washington's primary grape-growing regions are east of the Cascades, where heat rises consistently during long summer days, allowing for ideal ripening conditions. Beautiful diurnal shifts send temperatures cascading, creating as much as a 40-degree temperature difference between the wee hours of the night and the hottest parts of the day, so grapes retain their acidity.

In all, there are 13 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in the Evergreen State, growing more than 30 grape varieties, and each AVA is somehow unique. While not all offer wine touring, each is worth a taste.

WALLA WALLA VALLEY

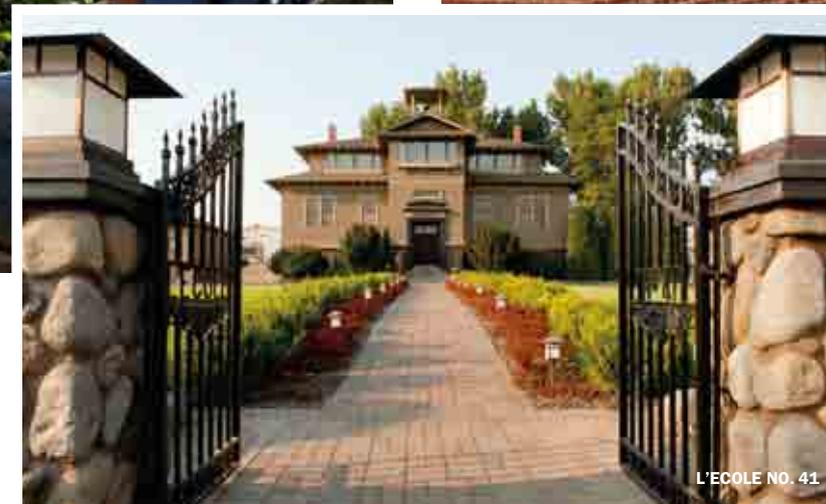
Some 15 million years ago, lava flowed across the eastern part of the state, then cooled into the basalt bedrock that covers much of this region. Next came the Missoula Floods—the result of glaciers moving south from Canada—which covered the basalt with a rich layer of well-drained sand and silt, loaded with minerals such as quartz and mica. All of this intense geological activity has created fantastic terroir in the Walla Walla area. Merlot struts its stuff here in Bordeaux blends, and the heat of the valley makes for great syrahs and for cabernets that are dense and lush.

WHEN YOU GO Walla Walla Valley (p. 110) may be famous for its onions, but it's also the state's premier touring region,

with more than 100 wineries. Tasting rooms in Walla Walla are mostly grouped by area. In the area west of town—the “vintage loop”—you'll find winery Long Shadows, as well as L'Ecole No. 41 and Woodward Canyon, both established in the early '80s. Downtown the tasting rooms are great for strolling, although most of the wineries—including Rotie Cellars, Drew Bledsoe's Doubleback, and Spring Valley Vineyard—produce their juice elsewhere in the valley. The airport area is home to more than 20 tasting rooms—including Dunham, Buty, and SYZYGY—many of which reside in quaint little converted military buildings. East of town, you'll find other pioneers, including Abeja, Walla Walla Vintners, and àMaurice, while to the south, Northstar, Pepper Bridge (with its subterranean wine caves), Fjellene, and Va Piano cover the hills.

YAKIMA VALLEY

More than one-third of the state's grapes are grown in Washington's oldest wine region, just east of the Cascade Mountains. Chardonnay is the most prodigious



L'ECOLE NO. 41

grape here, followed by cabernet sauvignon and merlot, with syrah on the rise. Three other AVAs—Rattlesnake Hills, Snipes Mountain, and Red Mountain—also lie within Yakima Valley.

WHEN YOU GO Taste your way west to east with a stop off Highway 82 near Yakima (p. 110) at Southard (technically outside the AVA, but worth a visit) in Selah. Park under drooping maples and meander up to the winery—right next to the house—where on a good day you'll run into the winemaker unloading bins of grapes from a forklift.

Then duck into Yakima, where Gilbert Cellars and Trevari Sparkling Cellars both have tasting rooms, before heading east to Prosser, where 12 wineries occupy a vintners village. Don't be surprised to see live music on the lawn outside Apex Cellars, or a rolling barbecue smoking

ribs while traveling around the village.

Before ending a tour here (or before continuing east to Red Mountain and the Tri-Cities) swing east of town for stops at Chinook Wines, one of the state's founding wineries; Mercer Estates; and Alexandria Nicole, where you'll want to request a visit to the “wine club” secreted away behind a bookshelf.

RED MOUNTAIN

Wind-blown loess soils atop Missoula Flood glacial deposits cover the state's smallest AVA. Grapes here benefit from the mountain's southwest-facing slope, which builds high heat during the day and allows the fruit to develop very ripe tannins. Meanwhile, cool nights—made cooler still by the Yakima River bounding the mountain to the west—help

these grapes retain acidity, giving wines structure and backbone.

Grow to know the mountain, and you'll be able to discern its terroir on the nose and palate. Until then, look for big, deep, dark, concentrated reds that, at their best, are also structured, tannic, and exceptionally balanced.

WHEN YOU GO Some 15 or so wineries call Red Mountain (p. 110) home. Up-and-comers Cooper and Corvus greet visitors first. Continue up the mountain along Sunset Road to Fidelitas, which on any given day may be hosting a vertical tasting while offering palatial views of the vineyards below. Further up the hill is Col Solare, with its impressive glimpses of the Horse Heaven Hills in the distance. The winery, a partnership between Tuscany's Marchesi Antinori and Chateau Ste. Michelle, is more inclined toward selling wine by the glass, flight, or bottle, but it's also the perfect place to catch a sunset.

Plan a visit to tiny little Goedhart, where they produce one varietal only—syrah—and very occasionally serve panini stuffed with vegetables from the garden of nearby old-timer Hedges Family Estate.

At the far end of the hill Tapteil Vineyard Winery offers imported olive oil tastings, in addition to wine and sweeping views of its 28-year-old vineyards.



The soil here is full of sandy sediment shot through with quartz and mica. Best of all, the town is delightful, and the lake it borders is breathtaking.

SNIPES MOUNTAIN

Between the Yakima River and Highway 82, a hill draped in sunshine, rising about 1,300 feet above sea level, juts out of the Yakima Valley floor. This is Snipes Mountain (p. 110), the sole protrusion of its kind in the Valley located entirely within the Yakima Valley AVA, and the state's second-smallest AVA.

Snipes has its own microclimate, its own rain shadow, and its own soil. The north slope is covered in lakebeds blanketed by wind-blown soils, and the south is home to aridisol composed of river-worn rock cobbles, compacted silt, and very little organic matter. Its steep south slope makes for great daytime ripening and also washes the grapes in wind, providing excellent air drainage. The elevation and the angle of the slopes provide dramatic cooling at night, which means the grapes retain bright acidity.

This is one of the first places in the state where vinifera grapes were planted—commercially as early as 1914 and 1917,

and some of the 1917 vines are still producing. In 1934 the site became the first commercial winery east of the Cascades.

WHEN YOU GO Grenache here has a great deal of intense fruit and balance but is not as brooding as at other places in the state. Sean Boyd of Rotie Cellars calls it “one of the best spots for grenache and mourvèdre in the state that we’ll ever find.” More than 30 of the state’s wineries use Snipes grapes, but only six call the AVA home. Until Upland opens a tasting room here in late 2013, one must taste this fruit elsewhere: at Upland’s Woodinville tasting room or in a Betz Besoleil or Maison Bleue La Montagnette grenache.

COLUMBIA VALLEY

In the lee of the Cascade Mountains lies the sprawling Columbia Valley AVA.

Stretching from the Okanogan National Forest, across the Methow Valley in the north, to the Oregon border in the south, and to the Idaho border near Lewiston in the east, it encompasses 10 of Washing-

ton’s 13 AVAs—including Yakima Valley and Lake Chelan.

At 11 million acres, the state’s largest grape-growing region can be daunting. Sub-AVAs, such as Lake Chelan, make touring it easier, but getting a taste of the valley is effortless: 99 percent of the grapes grown in the state come from the AVA, or one of its sub-AVAs. Riesling makes its home in the Columbia Valley—in Washington it is typically vinified dry or off dry—though merlot, chardonnay, and cabernet sauvignon also rank among the most-planted varieties.

LAKE CHELAN

Perched high above brilliant blue Lake Chelan (p. 100) are nearly 20 wineries.

The AVA is higher in elevation—and milder in climate—than any other in the state, and has a longer growing season. Thanks to ice-age glaciers, the soil here is full of sandy sediment shot through with quartz and mica. Best of all, the town is delightful, and the lake is breathtaking. This is also the only place in the state where you can taste by floatplane.

WHEN YOU GO The south side of the lake is home to six wineries, including the urbane Nefarious Cellars, set inside a vermilion tasting room with a deck that overlooks an entirely green- and aqua-colored view. Some days the winery will offer tastes of its syrah; on others it will

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Washington Tours & Attractions

only pour only viognier. Le sigh.

Nearby, Karma Vineyards makes sparkling wine in the traditional *methode Champenoise*—which means the wine isn't carbonated but rather goes through secondary fermentation in the bottle. And the big kid in the neighborhood is unequivocally Tsillan Cellars, with sweeping lawns and water features, plus a restaurant to boot.

Across the lake, 10 or so more wineries await, including the sprawling Mediterranean-inspired Benson Vineyards Estate and Hard Row to Hoe with boudoir lighting, saucily named wines, and a history that's more boats-and-broads tale than Depression-era saga.

On the Columbia River at Rio Vista, boaters bob in regularly—and a float-plane makes visits four times a week during high season to drop off tasters.

COLUMBIA GORGE

Along the wind-whipped Columbia Gorge (p. 94), tenacious vines cling to slopes. Here, cool maritime air pours in and meets hot, arid air rising from the

desert above. In the span of about 30 miles, microclimates change from maritime to Mediterranean, and soils shift between volcanic red mudstone and silty loams shot through with basaltic rock.

WHEN YOU GO Some 30 wineries line the Columbia Gorge on both sides of the river. In Washington, the Tuscan-themed Maryhill, with its sweeping view and concert amphitheater, anchors the collection. Below it, on the very banks of the Columbia River, is Waving Tree. And on a hill high above Lyle at Syncline winery, James and Poppie Mantone are primarily crafting Rhone varietals but also one of the state's only sparkling wines: Scintillation.

PUGET SOUND

Less than 100 acres are under vine in the Puget Sound AVA, which stretches from the Canadian border to south of Olympia, although more than 100 wineries have their tasting rooms within the AVA. Those who do source grapes here typically choose the area's primary varietals—Madeleine Angevine, Siegerebbe,

and Müller-Thurgau, although pinot noir and pinot gris also grow in the region.

While it's fun to seek out Seattle's urban wineries—tucked away in industrial districts and neighborhoods—or ferry to wineries such as Rolling Bay on Bainbridge Island, the easiest way for those pressed for time to get a taste of the state may be with a trip to Woodinville.

WHEN YOU GO Woodinville (p. 46), just 30 minutes northeast of downtown Seattle, is anchored by two large wineries that straddle Woodinville-Redmond Road: Columbia Winery and Chateau Ste. Michelle, which hosts as many as 20 concerts every summer. Also nearby are distillery Woodinville Whiskey, Redhook Brewery, and sibling wineries Januik and Novelty Hill, where you can also nab a pizza or a match of bocce.

At the roundabout at 145th Street Northeast and Woodinville-Redmond Road, all directions point to wine. This is the Hollywood Schoolhouse district and home to at least 20 smaller tasting rooms, such as Gorman Winery, where one can both play pinball and taste a lot of Red Mountain fruit, and William Church, where the French-named Bordeaux blend can't escape its very Washington terroir.

Then, on a hill above the district is Adams Bench, which offers structured, often opaque reds and a winemaker who is as likely to light the fire for you as he is to give you directions to the best meal in town.

In the Warehouse District, it is possible to sample 40 wineries within a single mile. Most of the rooms are staffed by the winemakers themselves, so don't be surprised to run into the men and women behind the juice as you stroll past a chop shop wedged in between wineries. At Woodinville Park North, wineries like Guardian Cellars serve up tastes and personality.

Meanwhile, at the wineries across North Woodinville Way, Two Vintners may be pouring a delicious grenache blanc, among other things; Tim and Paige could be punching down the Black Tongue Syrah at Stevens Winery; or Javier Alfonso can be found holding forth on the topic of how old-world varietals (hint: he's Spanish) can be grown exceptionally well in Washington state. ■

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