

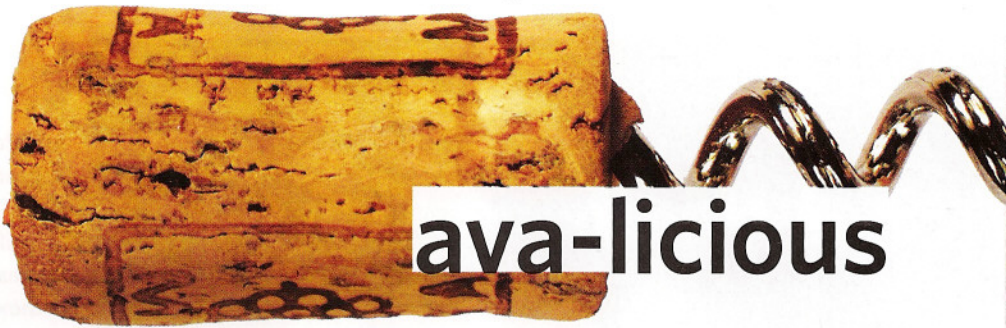
It helps to have something emblematic when you're trying to establish a reputation around the world. Take wine, where upcoming producers and countries often put a grape variety on their flag. Argentina has a bet on Malbec, and New Zealand capitalizes on Sauvignon Blanc, to name just two. The state of Washington, just south of the border on the pacific coast, is bucking the trend by offering diversity: Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot share close to 80 per cent of the vineyard in roughly equal parts, with Syrah grabbing another 7 per cent and 11 other varieties completing the picture.

Washington may be on its way to occupying more shelf space in wine stores, but it's obviously counting on some other blessing to draw our attention. There can't be any doubt about what it is: it's trademarked the phrase, "The perfect climate for wine."

Ten of Washington's eleven AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) are in the southeastern part of the state, a semi-desert with guaranteed cloud-free skies 300 days per year, very cool nights, equally hot days, obviously very little rain and extremely poor soils. Latitude is the same as Burgundy, which can't be a bad thing. Well, if you think about it, just add irrigation and this terroir may in fact become the perfect place to grow vines.

The advantages don't stop there. The dry air prevents rots of all kinds, so few chemical treatments are used, if any. Surprisingly, the vineyard is entirely phylloxera-free. Washington is one of the very few places on Earth where vines are not grafted on resistant rootstock. Shayn Bjornholm of the Washington Wine Commission mentions that on both occasions when phylloxera was accidentally introduced in the vineyard, the sandy soils prevented the infestations from spreading too fast and the cold winter just killed the bug altogether.

Disadvantages besides the need for irrigation include burying the vines for



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protection during the winter in colder spots and the necessary addition of nutrients to the soil. Producers are using more and more compost to this effect.

The first AVA, Yakima Valley, was created in 1983, followed by Walla Walla Valley a year later. The very large Columbia Valley AVA also came in 1984. Covering the entire eastern vineyard and extending into Oregon, it is the "generic" appellation for the state. Red Mountain, Columbia Gorge, Horse Heaven Hills, Wahluke Slope and Rattlesnake Hills came in between 2001 and 2006. The last two are not even a year old; they are the tiny Snipes Mountain and Lake Chelan AVAs. Covering close to 13,000 hectares planted with vines, ranging in altitude from 100 to 1,000 feet, they provide many differ-

ent microclimates, each with its particular orientation and slope. Specific grape varieties thrive in each of them.

The Puget Sound AVA is the odd ball of the lot. Located on the opposite side of the state, along the pacific coast and around the inlet of the same name, it is large, but only 32 hectares are planted. The climate is very different from the other AVAs, and it grows its own varieties, mostly Madeleine Angevine, Siegerebbe and Müller Thurgau.

The number of wineries grew from 80 in 1996 to more than 650 today. Many of them being small, they make Washington a place of choice to find unique, high quality, low quantity cuvées — a treasure chest for the true amateur. ☐

PACIFIC RIM DRY RIESLING 2006, (\$14)

The label does not mention any AVA because 15% of the grapes are imported from Germany. Bright pale colour. Minerally, distinctive floral aromas. Obvious finesse in the acidity and the clean, crisp flavours. The finish is long and perfectly dry. ★★★★★

CHATEAU STE MICHELLE AND PIERO ANTINORI COL SOLARE 2005, (\$79)

The result of a partnership with the famous Tuscan producer containing 71% Cab Sauv, 25% Merlot and 4% Cab Franc. Dark ruby. The beautiful nose of red fruits is elegant with its fine spicy touch. Fruity flavours, delicious, well balanced. Good firmness in the slightly warm finish. ★★★★★

LONG SHADOWS VINTNERS SEQUEL SYRAH 2006, (\$75)

John Duval, formerly of Australia's iconic Penfold's Grange, chose Washington as his "Sequel" for the continuation of his winemaker's career. Purple hue. Somewhat closed, fruity nose. Lots of ripe fruity flavours, silky tannins, seductive. Obvious aging potential. ★★★★★

PEPPER BRIDGE WINERY CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2004, (\$77)

Garnet. Perfumed, floral nose with a blueberry note, becomes more complex in the glass. Moderate oak. Quite compact, the balance between acidity, tannins and fruit is very nice. Will evolve favourably over many years. ★★★★★