

# Washington State Produces Winners from Subregions

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They make a lot of wine in Washington state, much of it coming from the expansive Columbia Valley, perched on the border of Oregon and Washington in the eastern shadow of the Cascade Mountains. They have been making wine in this northwest corner of the United States for quite some time, but in recent years production has spiked as American consumers have discovered the ever-expanding supermarket wine aisle.

Washington had 129 wineries in 1998 and produced about 11 million gallons of wine. Today, there are more than 540 wineries, which made more than 20 million gallons of wine in 2007. Washington ranks second behind California's 2,000-plus wineries and again second to California in vineyard acreage.

As Columbia Valley started cranking up the number of cases produced, it saw the wisdom of subdivision. Since 2001, Columbia Valley has defined five distinct districts within its 11 million acres (a little larger than Denmark, but smaller than West Virginia). These subregions (Red Mountain, Columbia Gorge, Horse Heaven Hills, Wahluke Slope and Rattlesnake Hills) are the places to go for more unique, interesting wines.

A recent tasting of mostly Columbia Valley cabernet sauvignon and merlots was not disappointing, but the wines were a couple of steps behind those from the smaller subregions in the excitement department. Wines from Mercer Estates and Gorman, which hail from Horse Heaven Hills and were not included in my tasting, shine above the regular, everyday wines from the greater Columbia Valley. Wineries that maintain the better-known Columbia Valley label, like Chateau Ste. Michelle- yet source the majority of their grapes from places like Horse Heaven Hills- stand out in a blind tasting and should re-consider what region it lists on its bottles in the future.

Of course, you have to pay for the privilege of tasting these wines from the newer districts. They also can be hard to find - some of the newer wineries have yet to make it to the Georgia market. With the exception Columbia Crest's H3 line of wines (a bargain at \$15), the wines from the smaller areas go for \$30 and above.

Other wine regions around the world also make a lot of decent, inexpensive wines. Chile and Australia come to mind. Washington and Columbia Valley wines can stand - no better and no worse - with the dozens of other mass-produced wines lining your grocers' shelves.

That's not a rave, but it's not a bleak picture either. All 30 wines in my tasting (except for one stinker) were decent. It's another example of how much better winemaking has become in the first decade of this century. If producers of exclusive, limited-release wines intend to keep charging high prices - especially in this economy - they had better

make sure each bottle contains exquisite, one-of-a-kind experiences. There's just too much palatable wine out there that costs \$30, \$40 and \$50 less than the ultra-luxury brands.

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## **WINE RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **2003 Chateau Ste. Michelle Merlot, Columbia Valley, Wash.**

\$15

Two thumbs up

Enticing aromas of raspberry, cola, dry cherry and mocha. Light- to medium-bodied with smooth flavors of red cherry, blueberry, Dr Pepper and a light mintiness.

### **2004 Genesis by Hogue Cellars Merlot, Washington State**

\$16

Two thumbs up

Earthy aromas of leather, cinnamon and mocha. Simple, pleasant flavors of cinnamon, cola, black cherry and tart raspberry. Genesis cab also a pleasant, solid choice.

### **2005 Milbrandt Vineyards Legacy Cabernet Sauvignon, Washington State**

\$25

Two thumbs up

Intense, powerful plum and concentrated blackberry. A big wine with plenty of tannins and flavors of root beer, cola, plum, blackberry and light mintiness.

### **2005 Columbia Crest H3 Cabernet Sauvignon, Horse Heaven Hills, Wash.**

\$15

Two thumbs up

Potent aromas of violets, cassis and cherry brandy. Velvety for a big wine, with flavors of blackberry, nutmeg, coffee, cola and a subtle earthiness. A great value.

### **2004 Chateau Ste. Michelle Ethos Cabernet Sauvignon, Columbia Valley, Wash.**

\$45

Two thumbs way up

A wine of character with rich aromas of cassis, black cherry and violets. Velvety with condensed flavors of raspberry, caramel, coffee and tart cherry. Ethos merlot also a winner.

**2004 Seven Hills Cabernet Sauvignon, Columbia Valley, Wash.**

\$30

Two thumbs up

Wonderful aromas of smoke, espresso, plum and blackberry cobbler.

Big but enjoyable with smoky flavors of coffee, plum, black licorice and mocha.