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Corkheads: Milbrandt Vineyards brings farming know-how to Washington wines

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BUTCH MILBRANDT was 3 when his father drove their tractor 135 miles over Oregon's Cascade Mountains in the middle of winter to start a hay and potato farm. Milbrandt doesn't remember much from those dust bowl days except perhaps the feeling that he, too, would grow up to be a farmer.

He does, however, embrace a distinct memory of the land in Eastern Washington where his family ended up six years later. Quincy, now part of Ancient Lakes, known for exceptional chardonnay and riesling, was barren and desolate in 1954. Mostly sagebrush and sand, he recalls.

Wine grape growing began about a decade later but serious dry wines weren't produced in the state until the 1970s. Now, the eastern corner of Washington is known for world-class riesling and pinot gris, not to mention intense merlot and syrah with a dusty, Old World edge. In my book, that excellence starts with independent growers, like the Milbrandts.

Butch and his brother Jerry got into the business relatively late, in 1997, after decades of growing apples and corn. Today, they farm 13 vineyards

totaling nearly 1,600 acres of wine grapes in the Columbia Valley, Wahluke Slope and Ancient Lakes, an area seeking official AVA status. They sell their fruit to some of the state's most noted players, including Chateau Ste. Michelle, Hogue Cellars and about 50 other wineries.

In 2005, the brothers launched Milbrandt Vineyards, the culmination of their experience as growers and the relationships they've fostered over the years. Gordon Hill, former winemaker at Chateau Ste. Michelle, makes the Milbrandt wines (you can taste Hill's touch on the merlots). Butch and Jerry work the vineyards and help with blending. They produce two tiers, Traditions (\$10-\$15) and Estates & Legacy (\$20-\$25) wines.

"As farmers, there is nothing more satisfying than controlling the quality and style of your product from start to finish," Butch says. "When you can taste the fruit that you worked so hard to grow, well, that's what good farming is all about."

Of the eight wines I tasted for this column, I found almost all of them balanced, sophisticated and worth more than their sticker price. When grape growers make wine, there's often an added dimension of intuition — an uber-sharp understanding of what grows best where — in the bottle. Take The Estates 2006 Merlot, which comes from the Wahluke Slope, a dry, hot region with almost no rain and well-draining, sand-and-gravel soils. There, merlot's soft yet supple fruit shines through.

On the flip side, white wines made from grapes grown on the Milbrandts' 1,600-foot-high Evergreen Vineyard, where the soil contains ancient broken basalt, showcase great minerality. The majority of the grapes in the brisk Traditions 2008 Pinot Gris Columbia Valley hail from this vineyard, and it

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shows. The wine is alive, and begs for food.

The Milbrandts started out as farmers, but they've got quite a business going. I like how they encourage consumers to enjoy their wines with food. On the back of every bottle's back label, they suggest a dish and recipe link. It's perforated, so you just tear it off and turn it over.

They also understand value. I tasted the Traditions cabernet sauvignon (\$15) against its Legacy sibling (\$25) and was floored by the elegance and integrated tannins of the lower-priced wine. In an economy where many small or high-end wineries are suffering, Milbrandt Vineyards is growing. Sales of the Traditions label doubled between 2008 and 2009, and the Estates & Legacy wines only dropped by 15 percent. Most vintners are experiencing twice those losses in their estate categories.

"Everyday quality wines should be between \$12 and \$15," Butch says. "It's the wine we're comfortable drinking."

For tasting notes, visit Yadegaran's blog at www.ibabuzz.com/bottomsup/category/corkheads .

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