DEPARTURES

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The AMERICA ISSUE

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UNCORKED

The New West Coast Reds

Get ready, Napa collectors: Washington State wine is arriving.

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO



BOTTLE TO BUY

Cayuse Syrah Bionic Frog
Walla Walla, Columbia Valley, Washington

Be prepared to fight for a bottle of the gorgeously concentrated, beefy, earthy, sweet black fruit-focused Syrah alongside the 12,000 fans already on the winery's mailing list. Of his disciples, winemaker Christophe Baron says, "These are the people who already know. And guess what? They're not going to tell you, because they want more! Do you see how this works?" Now you do. *$250*

Washington State winemaker Christophe Baron will never forget the day in 2014 when he released the first two wines bearing his second label, Horsepower, because exactly 73 seconds after he posted the offer on his website—in maximum lots of three bottles per person—all 400 cases of 2011 Sur Echalas Vineyard Grenache and 2011 The Tribe Vineyard Syrah sold out. "It's like the title of a movie, *Gone in 73 Seconds*!" he says, his French accent so strong that you'd never suspect he's spent the past 20 years living in Walla Walla, in southeastern Washington. "By the end of the day we had 2,000 people on the waiting list." Though the wine was priced at $110 a bottle, Baron describes Horsepower as his value project, and in the world of collectible wines, that's actually a fair statement. In fact, Horsepower represents spectacular value relative to the wines of Baron's flagship label, Cayuse, which can fetch upward of $400 per bottle—if you can find one. And those prices, believe it or not, represent value when contrasted against legendary California wines of similar critical acclaim.

For the past decade, Washington winemakers have been improving their product as well as grappling with how much they care to be compared with their grape-growing brethren down the West Coast. "We're not saying, 'Hey, world: We're California light,'" says Chris Peterson, winemaker at Avennia in Yakima Valley. "Just because we might be more affordable doesn't mean we're less world-class." He sells his violet-scented 2013 Arnaut Syrah for $50; his flagship 2013 Sestina, a minerally, Cabernet-centric Bordeaux blend, goes for $65.

Sound too good to be true? Depends on whom you ask. Greg Harrington, a master

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sommelier and winemaker who owns Gramercy Cellars in Walla Walla, says that when he recently showed his wines to buyers at high-end clubs in Palm Springs, they told him that his prices, which range between $40 and $85, are too cheap. "I don't need to be the price innovator personally," he says. "I just want to be respected at our price point, like, 'Wow, that wine was $50 and is incredible.'" Palm Springs buyers aside, he needn't worry. Sommeliers rave about the purity of Harrington's Syrahs and balance of his Cabernets. John Ragan, the master sommelier who oversees wine for New York City's Union Square Hospitality Group, says, "I love Greg's Cab because it tastes like real Cab. It has that beautiful—not ugly—herbal note that Cabernet should have." He adds, "A lot of people have written about Washington overperforming on the value side, but I think the real story now is how Washington is overperforming on the high-end."

Ted Baseler, president and CEO of Chateau Ste. Michelle, by far Washington's largest wine producer, joined the company 32 years ago when it was one of only 20 wineries in the state, and when Washington had fewer than 2,000 acres of planted vines. Today, there are 900 wineries growing grapes on 60,000 acres in Washington. "When people say, 'You guys need to be more innovative,' I think, What's more innovative than coming to eastern Washington's high desert, planting vines, and making great, world-class wines?" Baseler says. Ste. Michelle was founded as Prohibition ended, in 1934, and has ridden all the waves of vinous tastes as the American palate has evolved—Rieslings in the 1970s, Chardonnays in the '80s, Merlots in the '90s, and Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah (which emerged as Washington's calling cards) around the turn of this century.

If there was a moment when Washington turned a corner, it might have been in the '80s, when a group of winemakers—Baseler calls them "founding fathers"—including Gary Figgins (Leonetti Cellars), Rick Small (Woodward Canyon), Marty Clubb (L'Ecole No. 41), and Norm McKibben (Pepper Bridge Winery and Amavi Cellars) championed the growing area around Walla Walla. Thanks largely to them, that region is now home to many of the state's best wineries and one of its fastest growing federally designated American Viticultural Areas (essentially, an appellation).

Washington has 14 AVAs, and what the grape growers have been trying to do over the years is sift through the state's best soils for greater site specificity, the holy grail of high-end wine. "We're vigorously investigating what grows best where," says Bob Betz, who founded Betz Family Winery, in Columbia Valley, in 1998. A Master of Wine who started his winemaking career at Chateau Ste. Michelle in 1975, Betz is passionate about Washington's evolution. "This meteoric rise is not just due to our winemakers' passions, but also our viticultural passion," he says. Ben Smith, winemaker and cofounder at Cadence, a highly rated urban winery in South Seattle, says, "We started out—and we continue to be—vineyard-focused. We were the first in 1998 to do nothing but vineyard-designated Bordeaux blends." He paraphrases his friend and fellow Columbia Valley winemaker Chris Camarda, of Andrew Will Winery: "There are no great winemaking regions in the world that are not known for their vineyards." Cadence owns a vineyard on Red Mountain, Cara Mia, now in its 11th year, where they make about 200 cases each of Bel Canto, a Cabernet Franc–based blend, and Camerata, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. "Those are the ones making the name for us, knocking down the reviews," Smith says, "and they're both priced at $60."

"Washington is over-performing ON THE HIGH-END," says John Ragan, a master sommelier.

At L'Ecole No. 41, another top Washington winery, Marty Clubb says things took a turn 15 years ago when he set up its estate vineyards in Walla Walla. "I'm proud that all of our wines are good, but for me the most fun is focusing on single-site, single-vineyard wines like our Apogee Pepper Bridge, Perigee, and especially our 2011 Ferguson." The latter is a blend of 57 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 32 percent Merlot and 11 percent Cabernet Franc—a wine that won a Decanter World Wine Award for Best Bordeaux Varietal over £15 two years ago in London. And yet the current vintage of Ferguson, 2013, still retails for only $65. This raises the question: When will these prices start to rise to California levels? "Look, Harlan was $50 or $60 a bottle the first couple of years. Now it's $600—if you can get it," says Jay Soloff, a partner in DeLille Cellars, referring to one of Napa's most coveted Bordeaux-blend reds. Soloff founded DeLille in 1992 with Charles Lill, Greg Lill, and winemaker Chris Upchurch; he, too, can be counted among the founding fathers. While DeLille makes wines priced between the high $30s and $160 (for DeLille's lauded Grand Ciel Cabernet Sauvignon from Red Mountain), he says that his best seller is D2, a $45 Bordeaux-style red.

It seems that Washington's greatest wines to date, planted in its best soils found thus far, are pegged to the world's best red varieties: those of Bordeaux (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec) and those of the Rhône Valley (Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre). "I am a big fan of Bordeaux varieties, and that's what I think grow best here," says Rick Small, a winemaker who founded Woodward Canyon Winery in 1981 in Walla Walla. "Cab Franc can be just phenomenal," he adds. "I don't have a lot of experience with Malbec, but am working on that." Such reds have shown the ability to not only endure but also improve with age, which is the hallmark of collectible wines and exactly what collectors are searching for now that many Napa wines are untouchable. "This is key," says Upchurch. "Washington wines are structured right in between Bordeaux and California, which gives them more age-ability than many California wines."

As Washington continues to evolve, some of the wines are surprising even the people who made them. "I've done tastings with somms from around the world, tasting our wines back to the late '80s, and the wines have aged well," says Small. "One thing I notice about our wines and Washington wines, especially with Walla Walla Valley Cabernets, is that the early Cabernets we made, even with young vines, have aged quite well."

At Canlis, the Seattle restaurant that opened in 1950, wine director Nelson Daquip oversees an 86-page wine list. Representing Washington reds are 80 Cabernets, followed by 80 Bordeaux-style blends. Then there are 40 Rhône-style blends, and 100 Syrahs—including an entire page (40 selections) dedicated to Cayuse. "People come in looking for the hard-to-find California bottles," Daquip says. "But I'm like, 'Harlan who?'" ♦