

Northwest Merlot remains memorable in talented hands

By Eric Degerman

It's rare for a wine writer to receive gratitude for conducting a judging focused on an already-famous grape, but Merlot could still use a PR agent nearly two decades after being miscast in the Oscar-winning *Sideways*.

"Thank you for holding a Merlot-focused tasting," a vintner wrote. "One movie did so much damage to a wonderful varietal."

Another replied, "Very cool to give Merlot a look in this way!"

At this point, it's difficult to imagine Cabernet Sauvignon as anything other than the marquee attraction in Washington state. And while Merlot's star power dimmed some after that movie came out in fall 2004, it's hanging on as the second-most important red grape in a state that ranks No. 2 in the country for wine production.

And as our comparative tasting showed, some of the region's most respected producers are doing a marvelous job with Northwest Merlot. There were 114 examples submitted, and Abeja — one of Walla Walla's iconic brands — finished No. 1 with a delectable bottling from the 2019 vintage that features four historic vineyards across the Columbia Valley.

"No doubt there was a *Sideways* effect in the broad market, but that phenomenon isn't something most artisan wineries experienced," said Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, who shares the wine-making duties with her husband, Daniel. "At Abeja, we have a longstanding, loyal following. The movie did not sway our customers, and our Merlot sales have remained strong."

A 2009 study at Sonoma State University in California indicated the market for Merlot fell by 2% in the four years following *Sideways*. In Washington state, the numbers continue to tell a somewhat sad story about the variety. By 2006, Cabernet Sauvignon became king in Washington when it overtook Merlot in tonnage. In 2016, Washington winemakers harvested 48,400 tons of Merlot, well behind the whopping 71,100 tons of Cab.

Granted, overall production in the state's wine industry has dropped because of economics as well as vintage conditions, however by 2020, tonnage of Merlot in Washington had fallen by more than half from 2016 with 22,775 tons crushed. And if the trend continues, Syrah — at 18,230 tons in 2020 — will likely overtake Merlot in Washington. (The state's 2021

grape report will be available this spring.)

During the 2020 crush in Oregon, Merlot (1,596 tons) was far behind both Syrah (4,058) and Cabernet Sauvignon (3,881). And while Merlot is not on the radar of most Willamette Valley producers, Southern Oregon vintners deserve credit for crafting some of the Northwest's best examples.

"People are actively looking for Merlot," said Patrick Spangler of Spangler Vineyards in Roseburg. "They might still remember what was said about Pinot Noir in *Sideways*, but when that movie came out, Merlot was already getting dragged down by some of the stuff that was coming out of California, so in some ways (*Sideways*) did the variety a favor.

"I'd say in the past three years people who come into the tasting room have really been asking for Merlot, so it's coming back — especially if you give them something good to try," Spangler added.

The small screen also played a part in some of the "meh" Merlot from California as growers rushed to meet demand after the *60 Minutes* segment in 1991 on the so-called "French paradox" linking good health to moderate consumption of red wine.

Many times throughout our tasting there were repeat performers, especially when it came to vineyard sources and historic plantings.

Allan Brothers-owned Sagemoor Farms played a supporting role in at least six gold medals with fruit from Bacchus and Dionysus — vines along the White Bluffs American Viticultural Area with roots that dig back into the 1970s — and/or Weinbau on the Wahluke Slope.

"Bacchus and Weinbau are both well-suited to Merlot, but the 'X-factor' is the grower," says Daniel Wampfler, hired at Abeja in 2016 after eight years as winemaker at Dunham Cellars. "We have a strong relationship with the Sagemoor team."

Red Mountain, the second-smallest AVA in Washington, helped at least nine wineries earn a gold medal or better. Among the contributing vineyards are those owned by Jim Holmes, Dick Shaw and the Williams family of Kiona — all having earned induction into the Washington Wine Hall of Fame.

Fruit from Joe Hattrup's Elephant Mountain Vineyard in the Rattlesnake Hills of the Yakima Valley led to a trio of gold medals. Napa-trained

viticulturist Ed Kelly at Stillwater Creek Vineyard in the Frenchman Hills along the Royal Slope also was credited with growing grapes for three gold medals.

As a variety, particularly when grown in the Columbia Valley, Merlot now stands rather tall with broader shoulders. On the tannin scale, Merlot routinely checks in as bolder than Cabernet Sauvignon and plays so well in proprietary reds with Syrah, the fleshy and ripe Rhône used to build midpalate texture.

"It's true that Merlot has more muscle than it once did," said Daniel Wampfler, whose three years at Columbia Crest included work on the team credited with the 2005 Reserve Cab that Wine Spectator ranked No. 1 in the world in 2009. "We often blend Merlot into our Cabernet for structure and Cabernet into Merlot to add a touch of softness."

Last fall, Team Wampfler's 2020 Washington State Chardonnay won best of show at the Great Northwest Invitational Wine Competition, an event judged by some of the Northwest's leading wine buyers.

This winter, Abeja stood out again — this time for Merlot. The same bottling also merited a glowing review in *Forbes* magazine alongside other examples of Merlot from famous Washington brands.

"Abeja is known as a Cabernet Sauvignon house, and that's been the focus of our large-format programming," Daniel Wampfler said, "but we recently released a magnum of the 2020 Washington State Chardonnay for the first time, and that's been popular, so who knows? A big bottle of Merlot may be next!"

Our judges for this tasting were Roger Cockerline, winemaker, Neher Family Wines, Milton-Freewater, Ore.; Philippe Michel, founder, Oak Traditions, associate, Metis Northwest, Walla Walla; Mike Rader, Great Northwest Wine panelist, Kennewick, Wash.; April Reddout, Reddout Wine Consulting, Kennewick, Wash.; Ken Robertson, Great Northwest Wine columnist, Kennewick, Wash.; and Gordy Venneri, winery consultant, Neher Family Wines, Milton-Freewater, Ore. The socially distanced judging was staged Feb. 18 at the Clover Island Inn overlooking the Columbia River in historic downtown Kennewick.

Editor's note: Neither Cockerline, who gained fame for his work with Bunchgrass Winery, nor Venneri — co-founder of Walla Walla Vintners — evaluated their own entry during our tasting.

**Double gold medal | 98 points****Abeja 2019 Merlot, Columbia Valley \$50.00**

One of the Pacific Northwest's first destination wineries continues to prove the bottlings from this bucolic property in Walla Walla are worth seeking out as the husband/wife winemaking team of Daniel Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler produced our tastings most delicious example of Merlot. While there's significant influence from Abeja's estate vineyards (26%), the major contributions hail from two 40-year-old plantings near the White Bluffs of Sagemoor — Dionysus (42%) and Bacchus (26%). Ciel du Cheval contributes some Red Mountain muscle, too. A third of the barrels were new French oak, and the 20-month regimen shows beautiful integration. Its panoply of black and blue fruit, led by black cherry and black currant, makes room for light toast, mocha and a pinch of earth. The plummy structure teases out the smooth tannins that are carried along by Marionberry and capped by Baker's chocolate. At last fall's release party, The Kitchen at Abeja paired this bottling with braised beef, mashed potatoes and a shallot compote. "And it was sensational," Amy says. (688 cases, 14.5% alc.)

Double gold medal | 96 points**Château Ste. Michelle 2017 Canoe Ridge Estate Merlot, Horse Heaven Hills \$24.00**

Ste. Michelle first planted this site in the Horse Heaven Hills in 1991, and for the first 35 years of its life, all of the 559 acres were managed by Mimi Nye. The label reflects the winds that swirl up from the Columbia Gorge, which provide natural pest control and help Canoe Ridge Estate achieve its Salmon-Safe designation. Brian Mackey and his red wine team deftly use a blend of

new French and American oak to create a remarkably balanced and concentrated expression of Merlot that offers dark red fruit, toast and baking spices. (2,491 cases, 14.8% alc.)

Double gold medal | 96 points**Owen Roe 2019 DuBrul Vineyard Merlot, Yakima Valley \$56.00**

The Shiels family of Côte Bonneville fame also sell a portion of their grapes to some of Washington's winemaking illuminati. That includes David O'Reilly, a longtime supporter of the Yakima Valley, going back to his days as an Oregon winemaker. It's a classic expression of Washington Merlot in its theme of dark cherry, blackberry, cola and notes of rose petal. There's harmony to the cassis acidity and ageworthy tannins that leave room for a sprinkling of cocoa in the finish. (110 cases, 14.1% alc.)

Double gold medal | 95 points**Tamarack Cellars 2017 Merlot, Columbia Valley \$30.00**

Danny Gordon continues to maintain the high standards of founding winemaker Ron Coleman with this darkly purple beauty from the brand that pays tribute to Walla Walla airport's historic World War II firehouse. Napa-based Vintage Wine Estates invested wisely in Washington as its two brands in the state produced three of this tasting's top examples of Merlot. This one comes loaded with blackberry, plum and blueberry, while underpinnings of cedar are easily detected amid the balanced tannins. (1,000 cases, 14.3% alc.)

Merlot by the numbers

Here are a few statistics involving Great Northwest Wine's comparative tasting of Merlot:

- Total entries: 114
- Double gold medals: 10 (9%)
- Gold medals: 29 (25%)
- Silver medal: 70 (61%)
- Bronze medal: 5 (4%)
- Average price per bottle: \$34.68
- Mean price: \$33
- Average price for gold medalist wines: \$37.23
- Total cases represented in this judging: 477,392
- Average production: 4,187 cases
- Average production of gold medal winner: 588 cases
- Mean production of gold medal winner: 186 cases
- Average alcohol by volume: 14.36%
- Average alcohol by volume among gold medals: 14.39%
- What it would cost to buy one bottle of each wine judged: \$3,979

American Viticultural Areas represented: 19

Columbia Valley (42), Yakima Valley (14), Walla Walla Valley (11), Red Mountain (10), Horse Heaven Hills (8), Lewis-Clark Valley (3), Rattlesnake Hills (3), Royal Slope (3), Snake River Valley (3), Washington State (3), Applegate Valley (2), Umpqua Valley (2) Ancient Lakes of Columbia Valley (1), Eagle Foothills (1), Oregon (1), Rogue Valley (1), Southern Oregon (1), Wahluke Slope (1), White Bluffs (1).

Gold medals won by AVA

Columbia Valley (17), Horse Heaven Hills (5), Rattlesnake Hills (3), Red Mountain (3), Walla Walla Valley (3), Yakima Valley (3), Applegate Valley (1), Oregon (1), Royal Slope (1), Umpqua Valley (1), Washington State (1)