

# THE BIG HEAT

SCORCHING TEMPERATURES RETURNED TO WASHINGTON IN 2017, BUT VINTNERS ARE LEARNING TO ADAPT

BY TIM FISH



A number of the state's top wines this year come from the small but densely planted Red Mountain appellation in eastern Yakima Valley.

Seattle is known for cloudy skies and lots of rain, but across the Cascade Mountains in the high desert of eastern Washington, sunshine is bountiful. That's a blessing and increasingly a burden for the region's vintners, with summer temperatures spiking higher and higher. Following a string of swelter-

but the scorching pattern returned with a vengeance in 2017.

Growers and winemakers rose to the challenge, having learned from past vintages how to adapt to the changing climate. Yet despite their successes, the work of making high quality wine in 2017 wasn't easy. "There's so much about 2017 that I'll remember," says



vintage I've faced." Because of the near record-breaking heat and low yields, the 2017 reds are generally intense and concentrated, often revealing angular tannins. They are best consumed with food or after a few years in the cellar.

Tannin management was the main issue for reds, since grapes typically grow thicker skins to protect from heat. That has been a growing concern as temperatures have soared in recent years. The 2015 vintage, with its hard tannins, seemed to be a turning point for many winemakers, as they began exploring ways to retain their wines' bold fruit character, while tempering the tannic impact and retaining balanced acidity. In general, the 2017 reds avoid the over-ripe and pruny characteristics that are common in hot vintages, yet many lack freshness of flavor, with an acid-tannin balance that often has a hard edge.

Like many winemakers, Marty Clubb of L'Ecole No. 41 has been soaking juice on the skins for shorter periods and using controlled micro-oxygenation, which helps to soften the tannins. Chris Gorman of Gorman Winery has similarly dialed back tannins, starting with the 2017s. "For the most part, it's getting off the skins and seeds as fast as possible," he says. It's an acute issue for Gorman, who makes wine exclusively from Red Mountain, which produces broad-shouldered reds. "There's so much going on beneath that monolithic structure, you need to expose that."

All but a few of the highest-rated wines in my previous report ("Catching a Break," Aug. 31, 2019) were based on Syrah, but Washington's traditional star, Cabernet Sauvignon, steps back into the spotlight this year. Together, Cabernet and Syrah dominate my list of top bottlings, leading the pack of more than 400 wines I have reviewed in blind tastings at our Napa office. About 40% are 2017s, with an equal number of 2016s, while the rest are early releases from 2018 or stragglers from 2015. Overall, I give the 2017 vintage a 90-point rating on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, extending the state's streak to five outstanding vintages in a row.

**A**mong the year's best Cabernets, the Klipsun Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain 2016 (94 points, \$150) is the most impressive debut. Wonderfully structured, rich and polished, with currant, black olive and stony mineral notes, the wine comes from the nimble hands of consulting winemaker Doug Fletcher, who nurtured this new project after the Terlato family purchased the well-regarded Klipsun Vineyard in 2017.

A more established example comes from Gorman, who launched his eponymous label in 2002 and continues to build on his success. The Gorman Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain The Bully 2016 (94, \$50) is deeply structured and precisely detailed, with compelling blackberry and brooding dark spice flavors. Another top bottling is the Abeja Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2016 (94, \$60), which offers finesse and structure, showing elegantly expressive blackberry, basil and black olive flavors. Winemaker Daniel Wampfler is quickly making a name for himself not only at Abeja but also at actor Kyle MacLachlan's label, Pursued By Bear. Former Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino's Passing Time is anything but



Betz founder Bob Betz (left) and winemaker Louis Skinner produced two highly rated reds—a Syrah and a Grenache blend—in 2017 despite facing record-breaking heat.



Walla Walla-based Abeja makes outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon at a restored 19th-century farmstead, crafting one of this year's top-scoring versions.

a vanity project. Under the helm of winemaker Chris Peterson, the Passing Time Cabernet Sauvignon Horse Heaven Hills 2017 (94, \$85) is polished and finely detailed, with flavors of black cherry, coffee bean and mineral.

In terms of Syrah, the year's high-scorers include the silky Betz Syrah Red Mountain La Côte Rousse 2017 (94, \$62), which shows expressive violet and black raspberry aromas, along with two versions from winemaker Matt Reynvaan, the gutsy Syrah Walla Walla Valley Foothills Reserve 2017 (94, \$85) and the polished Syrah Walla Walla Valley Stonessence 2017 (94, \$110). The former is



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smoky meat and mineral tones, while the latter is impressively structured, featuring spirited flavors of blackberry, black olive and pepper beef. (A few leading producers, such as Cayuse, are absent from this report due to the ongoing pandemic, which has forced *Wine Spectator* to limit tastings out of safety concerns. Watch for those reviews in the coming weeks.)

Washington is also known for good value. Few wine regions produce such a diverse selection of budget-priced reds, whites and bubbly. Excellent examples include the sleek and vibrant Canoe Ridge Merlot Horse Heaven Hills The Expedition 2017 (91, \$17) and the supple, fruit-forward Chateau Ste. Michelle Chardonnay Columbia Valley 2017 (89, \$11). For best-buy Cabernets, look for the Luke Cabernet Sauvignon Wahluke Slope 2017 (92, \$25), a wine with presence and polish; the well-structured Pendulum Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2018 (91, \$15); and the Mercer Cabernet Sauvignon Horse Heaven Hills Mercer Bros. 2017 (90, \$20), a spry and lively red.

**T**he 2017 growing season started with promise. A cold winter and a cool, wet spring gave the vines an early boost of water, but delayed budbreak about two weeks past normal. Though temperatures in June were moderate, the furnace kicked on in July and continued through August. Eventually, Skinner says, “The vines just shut down,” which slowed ripening to a near-standstill.

In late summer, wildfires erupted across the Pacific Northwest, blanketing some regions such as Columbia Gorge with smoke. In most of Columbia Valley, fortunately, the smoke was too high in



Working with a range of different grapes and vineyards, Marty Clubb of L’Ecole No. 41 has used multiple techniques in recent years to soften the tannins of his wines in response to the state’s increasingly warmer growing seasons.

the atmosphere to have much impact. In fact, winemakers including Clubb and Skinner believe the high-altitude smoke acted as a buffer to slow ripening, which was beneficial under the conditions. Weather finally cooled in September and October, allowing the flavors to mature fully and helping to balance the sugar levels. Yields approached record lows, which only intensified tannins and harsh phenolics. Still, as Clubb recalls, “It was a nice finish.”

The 2018 vintage was a fraternal twin to 2017: similar but ultimately distinct. The growing season got a late start, and the weather cooperated during budbreak and bloom, but it was clear early on that it would be a large crop. “We really had to go into the vineyards and thin the crop,” Clubb says.

Temperatures were moderate in June, but soared in July and August. Just before Labor Day, a brief rain shower moved through the state, bringing a breath of cooler air that lasted through much of September and October. Days were warm but not overly hot, and

nights were quite cold. That saved the vintage from another setback due to heat.

Gorman describes the 2018 reds as “more plush and less tannic” than the 2017s. Skinner says the wines have expressive aromas and color intensity. “The 2018s are softer and more pliable than the 2017s,” he explains. “There’s a lot of freshness and intensity of flavors, with a lot of structure that hides just beneath the surface.”

I’ve only tasted a few dozen 2018s at this point, and most of those are whites, but my initial assessment aligns with what winemakers are saying. I look forward to tasting more from the vintage in the coming months. In the meantime, enjoy the many successes among the 2017 reds.

Senior editor Tim Fish is *Wine Spectator*’s lead

## Rating Washington Merlot, Cabernet and Syrah Vintages

2018	90-93	Cool autumn weather salvaged an otherwise hot year, making for full-bodied yet well-balanced wines	<i>NYR</i>
2017	90	A cool, wet spring led to a hot summer, but moderate weather near harvest helped build expression	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2016	91	A warm spring gave way to a moderate summer, promising balanced but structured wines	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2015	91	Hot, sunny growing season yielded full-bodied reds with ripe flavors and formidable tannins	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2014	92	Hot growing season produced wines of generosity, with ripe flavors; best achieve balance	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2013	92	Hot summer and cool harvest led to ripe flavors and moderate alcohols; Syrah better than Cabernet	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2012	95	Ideal conditions produced powerful wines with elegance	<i>Drink or hold</i>

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

**Vintage ratings:** 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended **Drinkability:** “NYR” means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; “drink” means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; “hold” means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.



# Tim Fish's Recommended Wines From Washington

More than 400 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/WashingtonAlpha093020](http://WineSpectator.com/WashingtonAlpha093020).  
WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

## TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>ABEJA Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2016</b> Offers finesse and structure, with expressive blackberry, basil and black olive flavors that build richness toward polished tannins.	94	\$60
<b>BETZ Syrah Red Mountain La Côte Rousse 2017</b> Silky and complex, with violet and black raspberry aromas that open to refined black cherry, smoked pepper and licorice flavors.	94	\$62
<b>GORMAN Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain The Bully 2016</b> Deeply structured and precisely detailed, offering compelling flavors of blackberry and brooding dark spices, with flinty minerality.	94	\$50
<b>KLIPSUN Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain 2016</b> Refined and impressively structured, with handsome currant, black olive and stony mineral notes that build richness and polish.	94	\$150
<b>PASSING TIME Cabernet Sauvignon Horse Heaven Hills 2017</b> Polished and finely detailed, this red is impressive, offering rich black cherry, coffee bean and stony mineral flavors that build tension.	94	\$85
<b>REYNVAAN Syrah Walla Walla Valley Foothills Reserve 2017</b> Gutsy and loaded with personality, yet harmonious, featuring bold blackberry, smoky meat, mineral and licorice flavors.	94	\$85
<b>REYNVAAN Syrah Walla Walla Valley Stonessence 2017</b> Polished, with a vibrant backbone of minerality and tannins wrapped in spirited blackberry, black olive and smoky pepper beef flavors.	94	\$110
<b>BOOKWALTER Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley Protagonist Conner-Lee Vineyard 2016</b> Combines power and grace, with a deeply structured core wrapped in expressive blackberry, licorice and smoked pepper flavors.	93	\$60
<b>FORCE MAJEURE Syrah Red Mountain 2017</b> Structured, with vibrant black cherry, licorice and smoky cracked pepper flavors, building tension toward medium-grained tannins.	93	\$75
<b>GUARDIAN Gun Metal Columbia Valley 2016</b> Expressive and multilayered, showing vibrant blackberry, espresso and tea flavors. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot.	93	\$42
<b>K Syrah Walla Walla Valley Powerline Vineyard 2016</b> Expressive and richly constructed, yet detailed and nuanced, offering lively blueberry, black olive and smoky meat flavors.	93	\$45
<b>MTR PRODUCTIONS Syrah Walla Walla Valley Memory Found 2014</b> Distinctive, with bold blackberry and smoky peppered beef aromas, leading to sleekly layered black olive and <i>garrigue</i> flavors.	93	\$95
<b>PURSUED BY BEAR Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2016</b> Poised and structured, with expressive black cherry, dusty mocha and allspice notes that build tension toward fine-grained tannins.	93	\$70
<b>SAVIAH Syrah Walla Walla Valley The Funk 2017</b> This hearty red is loaded with blackberry, wild game and black olive notes that build toward broad-shouldered tannins.	93	\$65
<b>SLEIGHT OF HAND Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley The Illusionist Reserve 2016</b> Combines a refined structure with polished black cherry, clove and toasted spice flavors that gain tension and complexity.	93	\$52
<b>SPARKMAN Ruby Leigh Columbia Valley 2016</b> Sleek and elegantly layered, with expressive black cherry, toasted spice and espresso flavors that take on structure. Merlot blend.	93	\$55

## TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>WATERBROOK Cabernet Sauvignon Red Mountain AVA Series 2016</b> A dense and lively core is wrapped in a polished exterior that shines with notes of black cherry, bittersweet mocha and stony minerality.	92	\$25
<b>LUKE Cabernet Sauvignon Wahluke Slope 2017</b> Shows presence, with expressive blackberry, smoked spice and dusty cedar notes that take on structure toward fine-grained tannins.	92	\$25
<b>PENDULUM Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2018</b> Sleek, yet shows potency in the background. Blackberry, mocha and cinnamon flavors build structure toward fine-grained tannins.	91	\$15
<b>CANOE RIDGE Merlot Horse Heaven Hills The Expedition 2017</b> Sleek and supple, with vibrant cherry, lead pencil and tomato leaf accents that build richness toward refined tannins.	91	\$17
<b>CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Indian Wells Red Blend Columbia Valley 2016</b> A lively red, with sleek and plump fruit, offering blackberry, licorice and spice flavors that linger toward polished tannins. Syrah blend.	90	\$18
<b>PACIFIC RIM Riesling Columbia Valley J 2018</b> This white is crisp and sleek, with appealing honeysuckle, apricot and honeydew flavors.	89	\$10
<b>MARYHILL Winemaker's Red Columbia Valley 2016</b> Supple and elegant, with pretty cherry, rose petal and orange peel accents that linger on the finish. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	89	\$16
<b>L'ECOLE NO. 41 Sémillon Columbia Valley 2018</b> A fleshy and supple white, showing delicate accents of beeswax and apricot that linger on the finish.	89	\$15
<b>HEDGES Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley CMS 2017</b> This is a sleek version, featuring appealing flavors of black cherry and spicy tobacco.	88	\$16
<b>GUIDE WINE CO. Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2017</b> A zesty and easygoing red, offering plucky red currant and smoky herb flavors.	88	\$15
<b>DOMAINE STE. MICHELLE Brut Columbia Valley NV</b> This sparkler is snappy and vibrant, featuring appealing flavors of pear, lemon and spice.	88	\$13
<b>CHARLES &amp; CHARLES Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah Columbia Valley Post No. 35 2017</b> A plucky red, showing zesty black cherry, cracked pepper and smoky herb flavors. Finishes with a slight grip of tannins.	88	\$14
<b>THE ORIGINALS Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2017</b> A lightly zesty and easygoing style, delivering black cherry and espresso flavors.	87	\$12
<b>PERIMETER Riesling Washington 2018</b> This white is soft and easygoing, showing notes of pineapple and light peach.	87	\$8
<b>COLUMBIA CREST Merlot Columbia Valley Grand Estates 2016</b> A trim and moderately built red, delivering sleek flavors of currant and notes of tobacco.	87	\$12
<b>CASTLE ROCK Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley 2017</b> This red is appealing, offering medium-bodied flavors of blackberry and green tea.	87	\$11