

Rocky Red

Syrah thrives on Washington's stony slopes

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 BY ERICA DUECY

➤ WASHINGTON IS NO STRANGER TO SURPRISE BREAKOUTS — take the flannel-shirted grunge-rock movement of the '90s and the \$8 Starbucks coffee as examples — and winemakers here are betting that the next big thing might just be syrah. Popular varietals like cabernet sauvignon and merlot have so far been the dominant reds from the state, but syrah seems to be on the upswing. If sold-out vintages and five-year winery waitlists are any indication, the state already has already uncorked a cult favorite.

“Syrahs are starting to rise to the surface,” says Amber McDonough, wine concierge at Seattle’s Hotel Vintage Park, a wine-focused hotel. McDonough often arranges wine-and-alpine adventures for her guests, including wine tasting-and-snowshoeing tours. She also sets her clients up with hard-to-get après-ski tasting appointments in Woodinville, where more than 80 wineries and tasting rooms operate. The town is a 20-minute drive from Seattle, and an easy stop for skiers venturing to the Summit at Snoqualmie and Stevens Pass.

Most people know Washington as a place of lush pine forests and drizzly days, a climactic leap from France’s sun-baked Northern Rhone Valley, the ancestral home of syrah. But cross the Cascade Mountains, where some peaks top 14,000 feet, and you quickly



The Cascades don't just make for beautiful scenery but also beautiful climate for Washington syrah.

hit the desert. With fewer than 10 inches of rain a year, the wine regions of eastern Washington are hot and dry in the summer, and subzero in the winter, with terrible, sandy soils to boot. Translation: Human inhabitants might not love it, but syrah couldn't be happier.

Many wine aficionados are surprised to learn that Washington is second in the nation only to California in wine production. Although growers began planting in the 1970s, few experimented with syrah until

the late 1990s. Christophe Baron, of Cayuse, was one of the first winemaker-growers to realize syrah's potential in the state.

"The reason I'm here is because of the stones," Baron says. Traveling through Walla Walla on a road trip in 1996, Baron spotted an area filled with large stones like those in the vineyards of the Southern Rhone, and quickly pulled over to investigate. In 1997, he planted vines in this area (now called the Stony District or the Rocks of Walla Walla, depending on who you ask). Amazingly, his first critically acclaimed syrah arrived just a year later, with the 1998 vintage. At the time, no vineyards were planted nearby. Now the area is covered in syrah vines.

"Syrah is a great varietal — it transpires the sense of terroir very well," Baron says. The wines can be deep and smoky, or plush and fruity, depending on where and how they're grown. In general, Washington's syrahs are more fruit-driven than the Rhone's syrahs, but with more herbal and mineral notes than Australian or Californian vintages.*

There's also this happy coincidence: Washington's main syrah-producing region of Columbia Valley also happens to lie between the 46th and 47th parallel, the same as the Northern Rhone. The longer summertime day length and steep diurnal temperature shifts at this northerly latitude seem to provide a favorable ripening pattern for syrah. "It keeps the grapes in balance, producing sugar



in the day, and maintaining structure and acidity at night," says Bob Betz, of Betz Family Winery, part of a small but passionate group of syrah-focused winemakers in the state.

Others focusing mostly, or solely, on syrah and Rhone varietals include Efesté, K Vintners, Rasa, Reynvaan, Sleight of Hand Cellars, and Syncline. These boutique producers (most make fewer than 5,000 cases a year) are working at the premium end of the market, where bottles start at \$35 and can reach \$200 at auction for a recent release of the coveted Cayuse.

Winemakers contend that these wines are priced competitively, given their quality and scarcity. "We do blind tastings with other high-end syrahs from around the world to make sure that our wines compete qualitatively," says Billo Naravane of Rasa Vineyards, whose syrahs range from \$60 to \$85. "We want our wines to be relative values."

While it remains to be seen whether syrah will become the state's signature varietal, evidence is mounting that it could be Washington's ticket to wine greatness. "If you look at soil analyses in the state, you'd see that a lot of sites are better suited to syrah than cabernet sauvignon, but cab is king here — it's an easier-selling wine," says Naravane.

Cabernet might still be more popular, but syrah growers believe they're on the cusp of a breakthrough. "We've had great success in syrah already, and we know there are incredible sites that exist that haven't been found yet," says Charles Smith of K Vintners, who makes nine single-vineyard syrahs. "It's a real pioneer mentality here. It's a great place — not for dreamers but for doers." Best to sign up for those winery waitlists now, just in case Washington syrahs do hit it big. ●

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