

Fresh-Washed

WASHINGTON STATE WINES BALANCE RIPENESS AND RESTRAINT

by Meg Houston Maker

“Freshness.” That word peppers my tasting notes after a recent tour of Washington State.

Let’s throw “vitality,” “focus” and “balance” into the mix, too.

Although well known for Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon, the state is home to nearly 70 grape varieties, almost all own-rooted thanks to the dry loess soils. Its 50,000 vineyard acres make it America’s second-largest wine producer, yielding 16 million cases annually. And with nearly 900 licensed wineries, variety rules the day.

Washington’s vines soak up lots of sunshine during the long Pacific Northwest growing season, but all that heat is balanced by high latitudes and cooling breezes.

Bob Betz, MW, of Betz Family Winery, says these conditions lead to “more structure and aromatic purity” in his revered Rhône- and Bordeaux-style wines, allowing them to “deliver a supple but structured palate.”

David O’Reilly of Owen Roe, in the Yakima Valley, agrees. “You can always ripen fruit because you have long, sunny days, but you still have natural balance,” he says. The result? Wines that are “obviously New World, but with natural acidity.”

That makes them superlative gastronomy wines, friendly but also refreshing. Below are just ten of my favorites from recent tastings, mostly from smaller producers: white, rosé and red wines that strike that delicious balance between ripeness and restraint.



Chinook 2015 Sauvignon Blanc, Yakima Valley (\$19) A Bordeaux-style wine like a mouthful of Bosc and Anjou pear steeped in lime juice. A kick of flint and tingly acidity suggests pairing with fish and sushi.



Tranche 2015 Pink Pape Rosé, Blackrock Vineyard, Yakima Valley (\$20) This blend of Grenache, Counoise and Cinsault is light and shimmering but packs a pop of strawberries, apple blossoms and white pepper. Serious, but also good for sipping.



Gramercy Cellars 2014 The Third Man Grenache, Columbia Valley (\$36) Fey light red but drenched in glossy raspberry and cherry fruit. A hit of cinnamon makes it a good partner for tagines and spiced meats.



Syncline 2015 Carignan-Grenache, Horse Heaven Hills (\$30) Carignan and Grenache combine forces, yielding peppery pink fruits and flowers dressed in minty oregano. It’s perfect for lamb.



Betz Family 2014 Besoleil, Columbia Valley (\$60) A blend of Grenache, Cinsault, Counoise and Mourvèdre that’s ablaze with rose petals, tart strawberry, cherries and cracked pepper. Beautifully crafted, it pairs broadly.



Sleight of Hand Cellars 2010 Levitation Syrah, Columbia Valley (\$45) High-toned and fleshy, crackling with tart cherries and an acid-washed finish that lets it partner with light meats and poultry.



Dusted Valley 2013 Stained Tooth Syrah, Columbia Valley (\$36) Saturated with sweet red fruits but also edged by earth and acid, wild game and green olives. Use it as you would a young Northern Rhône Syrah.



Gilbert Cellars 2014 Left Bank, Columbia Valley (\$24) This Cabernet-dominant blend carries seamless cherry fruit upon a silken body. Versatile and an exceptional value. Also seek out the winery’s Cab Franc, Malbec and Grenache Rosé.



Alexandria Nicole 2013 Quarry Butte, Destiny Ridge Vineyard, Horse Heaven Hills (\$26) A crowd-pleasing Bordeaux blend offering black and red stone fruits dusted with herbs and cocoa-y tannins. Great for slow-roasted meats.



Owen Roe 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Willow Vineyard, 1973 Block, Yakima Valley (\$75) Grown in the storied Red Willow Vineyard, this Cab mingles dark red fruits with cooling cypress. A wine for lovers of serious Cabernet. ■■

Red Willow Vineyard located in the far western end of Yakima Valley AVA.