

Washington's winemakers have lived a bit in the shadow of California. But now the winemakers of the Northwest are stepping onto the wine scene and flexing their muscles. Photographer and writer Claes Lofgren takes us among vineyards and historical flashbacks.

On the western front, a lot of news

SEATTLE

My tour of Washington State starts in Seattle. It feels natural because this is where viticulture began. A few wine-loving professors in Seattle took the state's hitherto modest vineyards to a new level when they formed Associated Vintners, later Columbia Winery, in 1962. The hobbyists made great wines and built a large production facility outside Seattle. What became Columbia Winery is now owned by California-based Gallo and is the state's third largest producer. At the same time, some farmers had started planting Riesling in the Yakima Valley and formed the American Wine Growers. They hired the legendary André Tchelistcheff from Beaulieu Vineyard in Napa, who saw the potential and became a consultant to what is now by far the state's largest wine producer, Chateau Ste Michelle Estates. With 3,500 acres of their own grapes and as the largest buyer from independent growers, they are the lifeblood of the wine industry. They produce more than half of all wine in Washington - over 100 million liters. But lately, the giant has been struggling with profitability and recently announced that Ste Michelle is cutting 40% of its grape purchases over a five-year period. "We need to reduce production and focus on the premium segment," says Linda Eller, communications manager at Chateau Ste Michelle. That is, 120 different labels, perhaps most notable is their collaboration with Ernst Loosen in Mosel, the wine Eroica made from Riesling is a huge success. Antinori and Gassier are other partners with successful results. Most of the wines are made in Chateau Ste Michelle's main facility Canoe Ridge outside Paterson in the Columbia Valley. Columbia Crest is another giant in the group, with 21 different brands and its own facility. They also own Spring Valley Vineyard where Kate Raymond makes full-bodied and peppery wines in a slightly traditional style.

Quilceda Creek is located in Snohomish, north of Seattle. Alex Golitzin started making wine there on a small scale in 1975. He was helped and encouraged by his uncle, the aforementioned wine legend André Tchelistcheff. Together with his wife Jeannette, Alex Golitzin started Quilceda Creek, the state's 12th registered winery. Today, his son Paul has taken over and makes Washington's most sought-after and awarded wines. And also among the most expensive, but they still cost only a fraction of what the equivalent quality costs in Napa. All of the grapes are sourced from the Galitzine vineyard in the Red Mountain AVA and from Champoux and Mach One in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA on the edge of the Columbia River. The wines from here are considered very good and received early attention thanks to, among other things, "100 scorers" by the American wine critic Robert Parker. Seattle is green and lush, rain and moisture from the sea are constantly on.

Many winemakers have their facilities here, even more have so-called "tasting rooms" where they sell the wines to visitors. But the grapes grow three hours to the east, on the other side of the Cascade Mountains. The mountain range stands like a wall against the maritime climate and on the other side it is dry, bordering on desert. Here you begin to understand how the landscape was formed and how dominant the Columbia River and its tributaries are. Without water, there is no life, and that is certainly true here. Warm days with temperatures well above thirty degrees alternate with chilly nights that prolong the ripening process. Winters can be very cold with the risk of frost in spring. At the same time, they have little problem with pests and Phylloxera has not taken hold here. The combination of cold and loess soils has kept it at bay. So far, one might add, it has started to ravage Walla Walla. But most of the vineyards are not grafted onto resistant roots, which could be a ticking time bomb if the plague spreads.

Two natural phenomena characterize the landscape and soils of eastern Washington and parts of Oregon. Fifteen million years ago, major volcanic eruptions spread lava across the landscape and land uplift created the Great Mountains. At the end of the Ice Age, 15 000 years ago, a huge lake in Montana was created by further volcanic eruptions and the melting ice. The pressure broke the ice wall and created a tidal wave that flowed down Washington towards the Pacific Ocean. This was repeated 40 times over a 2000-year period, bringing with it volcanic soil such as basalt, large rocks, sediments and various soils. This is called the Missoula River and the force of the breakthroughs created the terroir that is so favorable to viticulture. Deep valleys with layers upon layers of different soil layers. The Columbia Gorge was created by these forces and is insanely beautiful to travel along.

One of the winemakers on the outskirts of Seattle is **Andrew Latta**. He worked ten years for winemaker Charles Smith (more on him in the next issue) before going out on his own. Today he has what's called an 'urban winery'. This means that he doesn't own his own vineyards, but has full control in collaboration with the grape growers. He seeks out cooler locations at higher altitudes to make more elegant wines. Andrew works with some odd grapes, he offers roussanne, pinot gris in addition to chardonnay. Among the reds he has different varieties of GSM, grenache, syrah and mourvedre. Syrah and cabernet is also a slightly unusual combination, a tribute to the cult producer Trevallion. He uses only natural yeast, as little sway as possible and when possible 50 percent whole clusters. A sympathetic producer who, in addition to his usual wines, makes a series of wines he calls Kind Stranger where part of the proceeds go to charity.

Another story is that of **DeLille Cellars**, one of the pioneers in the area. They were started by four enthusiasts in the early 1990s. Chris Upchurch had made some wine at home in his garage and was keen to make more. He became friends with Jay Soloff and they started making wine together. The dream of having their own wine brand began to grow. At a Rotary meeting, Jay and Greg Lill met and started talking wine. Together with Greg's father Charles Lill, who was sitting on the money, DeLille Cellars was formed. They brought in one of Washington's early legends, David Lake MW as a consultant. The aim from the start was to make Bordeaux blends, they traveled around the west of France and learned as much as possible from the great chateaux. Grapes were then bought from the best vineyards in the Red Mountains and Horse Heaven Hill. Today they are considered among the top producers in the state with wines such as Chaleur Estate, D2, and Chaleur Blanc. They have built a large, modern winery and tasting room in a refurbished brewery and also run Woodinville's premier restaurant here. Jason Gorski is the winemaker and vineyard manager since 2019, having worked alongside Chris Upchurch since 2011. DeLille is a cult wine that truly demonstrates the capacity that exists when the right grapes are in the right hands. >

YAKIMA VALLEY & RED MOUNTAIN

In Prosser in the Yakima Valley, I meet Gabriel Crowell who, together with two friends, started **Tirridis** two years ago. Three champagne-loving enology students who have decided that it is possible to make good sparkling wine in Washington. And in a short time, they've made a name for themselves. They're renting an old abandoned apple factory that's been converted into a giant winery. The wines, Tirridis is the only producer in Washington that only makes sparkling wine, are consistently nice with good acidity. They use the usual chardonnay and pinot noir grapes in part, but also experiment with grapes such as riesling, pinot gris and viognier. The production is 100% according to the traditional method, no cheating with added carbon dioxide. Most of the wines are Non-Vintage, they blend different vintages as much as possible. They haven't been at it long.

Red mountain AVA is not big, but among the most important areas for quality wine. Two far-sighted gentlemen planted the first grapes in 1975 in the then desolate area.

Kiona Vineyards was the name, followed by Ciel de Cheval. Then a new family came in and planted what would become Klipsum. The vineyards became famous as the success of Quilceda Creek and DeLille spread and demand for local grapes soared.

Tom Hedges and his French-born wife Anne-Marie started an export business in Washington in 1986. By chance, in 1987 they received a large order from the Swedish Vin & Spritcentralen, which had tasted their Columbia Valley Merlot/Cabernet blend. The wine was such a success in Sweden that in 1989 the couple could afford to buy land in the then unknown Red Mountain AVA and plant 20 hectares of Bordeaux grapes. Swedish winemaker Lars Torstenson was for several

years flying winemaker. Tom and Anne-Marie's daughter Sarah Hedges Goedhart is the head winemaker since 2015 and their son Christophe is the CEO. Christophe tells the Hedges' story. - Tom heard they were looking for wine from here so he used his contacts to get something together - something he hoped the Swedish buyers would like. When the order arrived, he had no finished wine in that volume and no money. He then asked for half the money in advance, which was no problem for the state giant. This enabled him to buy the volumes that were then shipped to Sweden. The estate has grown to more than 50 hectares and the wines, considered to be among Red Mountain's finest, can still be found from time to time in the Systembolaget's ordering range. Since 2008, Hedges has been farming entirely biodynamically. It has its challenges, but so far they have managed to beat back various attacks with organic methods. Only a few grow biodynamically in the state, but organic thinking has increased significantly. Since 2022, Washington's growers have created a common certification, Sustainable WA, where a number of points must be met to be able to call themselves sustainable growers.

Closest neighbor to **Hedges** is **Col Solare** with a winery and tasting room in Italian style. The winemaker is Stephanie Cohen. A little further down the hill I meet Chris Upchurch and his wife Thea. After leaving DeLille, he is enjoying life with a winery on a much smaller scale. His own wines are of course of the same class. The vineyard was bought back in 2007, but it is only in recent years that he has been able to spend all his time here. Chris and Thea have mainly cabernet sauvignon and merlot planted in Red Mountain, but for a few years they have also owned a vineyard in a new AVA Candy Mountain.

WALLA WALLA

Walla Walla AVA is central to both Washington's history and current popularity. The sleepy town used to be the center of wheat and pea farms, but is now among the hottest wine regions in the world.

Downtown Walla Walla is pleasant with tasting rooms all along Main Street and in surrounding neighborhoods. Modern wine history began here in 1974 when Gary Figgins started **Leonetti Cellars**. He also helped plant the state's largest vineyard at the time, **Seven Hills Vineyard**, along with **Norm McKibben** and **Marty Clubb of L'Ecole 41**.

Around the same time, Marty Clubb's neighbor Rick Small planted his vineyard that would become **Woodward Canyon Winery**. L'Ecole 41 is still one of Walla Walla's leading producers and is highly ranked throughout the state. The biggest surprise, when I taste, is a brilliant chenin blanc from late harvest grapes from old vines and a semillon/sauvignon blanc modeled on Graves.

Then a fantastic set of reds with the Vineyard Collection from Perigee and Ferguson and Estate syrah topping the list.

Christophe Baron is a legend in Walla Walla. Originally from Champagne, he came to the region after working in wine all over the world. During a visit to the area, he saw vineyards with large stones like those in Châteauneuf du Pape, and with similar soils. Perfect for Syrah. Land was cheap at the time and he bought as much as he could afford, 4 hectares.

People called him the crazy Frenchman, because you can't grow wine there! He first vinified the grapes at Pepper Bridge until he could build his own **Cayuse Vineyards**. In 2002, he was the first to convert to biodynamic farming and now uses horses to work the vineyard. He has expanded to 30 hectares, but production is small, 72000 bottles sold directly to the customer list which includes 3500 thirsty wine lovers. 15000 are in line. Baron's drive for quality has inspired others.

When **Matt Reynvaan** dropped out of college and moved back home to Walla Walla and his parents' farm, he was more interested in golf than wine. On a round with Marty Clubb at L'Ecole No 41, he accepted a challenge. "If you can get within three meters of the flag on this hole 200 meters away on one shot, I'll hire you." He did, and after a couple of years he was ready to take over the family's small vineyard. Matt was also mentored by Christophe Baron and worked hard to learn how to make wine at his level. When Matt Reynvaan released his first own wine in 2010, it was received with great acclaim in the American wine press. Today, the Reynvaan family owns 13 hectares that they cultivate biodynamically. The vineyards are located at an elevation of 500 meters in Blue Mountain, on the Oregon border, and next to Cayuse on the Oregon side of the Walla Walla AVA.

Together with father Mike Reynvaan, who started the vineyard, I go to **Milton-Freewater** on the Oregon side where **The Rocks** is located. The grapes grow here on an old dried-out riverbed with fist-sized stones, extremely difficult to work with. Syrah is the main grape, but Grenache Blanc, Viognier and Marsanne are also grown here, as well as Bordeaux grapes on a smaller scale. The grapes make fantastic wines with personality and finesse. Reynvaan Family Vineyards has received rave reviews from wine critics around the world and is now considered one of the top wineries in Washington.

My second day in Walla Walla does not start well. I had read about the big forest fires raging in Canada, but had not given it much thought. Now the wind had changed and the fire smoke lay like a dense fog over the area. Luckily, the fires themselves were far away, but the visibility and lack of sunlight were not good for the grapes and the environment - or photography. But the smoke didn't stop an exciting visit to a newcomer to Walla Walla, but an old acquaintance from Spain.

The Martinez-Bujanda family with wines like Conde de Valdemar, Finca Valpiedra in Rioja and Finca Antigua in La Mancha. A bitter conflict has divided the family, with one part retaining Martinez-Bujanda while the other part retains Bodegas Valdemar in Rioja and the newly established **Valdemar Estates** in Walla Walla.

Jesus Martinez-Bujanda explains the decision to invest in the U.S. "I was studying at the University of Washington and I really liked the area. We were thinking of expanding in Spain, but both my father and my sister were very impressed with the possibilities here. We decided to go all in and be the first international producer in Washington. - It felt natural to be able to sell our Rioja wines to consumers here. To get a license for that, we also had to open a restaurant. The facility opened in 2019 and got a lot of attention. Then came COVID, so it's only now that we're back in full operation. It's now considered the best in Walla Walla," he says proudly.

Jesus Martinez-Bujanda lives here permanently now and is the CEO of the whole company, so with the time difference, there won't be much sleep, although sister Ana pulls a big load in Oyón. The winemaker at Valdemar Estates is Devyani Gupta who was drawn into the world of wine at a young age - mentored by legends Gary Figgins and Norm McKibben. Roussanne, chardonnay, syrah and cabernet are on the wine list at the moment, but Jesus says they have cuttings of Rioja grapes in quarantine to be planted soon.

Long Shadows Vintners was created by Allen Schoup, who died last year. Schoup was largely responsible for Ste Michell's unimaginable success. When he left the CEO's job in 2000, he could look back on an amazing legacy. He worked constantly to make Washington's wines famous and saw the other producers not as competitors but as partners. The competition was California! The idea of Long Shadows was to invite nine of the wine world's leading figures to make wine in Washington. Allen Schoup was behind the success of Col Solare and Eroica, so the idea was that people he had met over the years, such as Michel Roland, John Duval, Armin Diel, the Folonari brothers and a few other winemakers from California, would contribute their talents. The winemaker in charge is now Gilles Nicault from France. He has been in Washington since 1994. All contracts with the international winemakers have ended but Gilles still makes the wines in their spirit.

Syncline in the **Columbia River Gorge** will be the last visit, a three-hour drive in a dramatic landscape along the Columbia River. Unfortunately difficult to photograph because of the fire smoke.

Syncline is run by James and Poppie Montone who started together in 1997 with the drive to make small scale wines, grow biodynamically and follow their passion for the wines of the Rhône and Burgundy. They are very small, 5000 cases, but grow and vinify a nice collection of grapes such as picpoul, furmint, gamay, grenache, grüner veltliner in addition to the traditional ones. A few bottles standing in the pupitre reveal that they also make some bubbly.

A hugely ambitious project driven with love. A very worthy conclusion to a fabulous journey through Washington's amazing wine world.

We look forward to more wines from there in Sweden! |

Captions

Previous page: Horse Heaven Hills is one of the premier vineyards, planted on the Columbia River. PHOTO: ANDREA JOHNSON/ WASHINGTON STATE WINE COMMISSION

1. Quilceda Creek makes award-winning wines that are widely acclaimed by the wine world.
 2. Chateau Ste Michelle Estates is the largest in Washington with great wines in all price ranges.
 3. Andrew Latta makes exciting wines in his urban winery, located in an industrial area of Seattle.
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1. Christophe Hedges and his family like Sweden, the success here built the winery.
 2. Chris and Thea Upchurch in the Red Mountains make great wines on a small scale. Their keen interest in art is reflected on the wine labels

SUSTAINABLE INTEREST Wine production is around 200 million liters a year. Around 90% of producers are small, producing less than 60 000 bottles a year. Washington is perfect for sustainably grown wines for several reasons. The climate with cold winters prevents many pests and diseases from taking hold. Consumers have a strong interest in sustainability, and many winegrowers are working to make further changes in technology

1. Mike Reynvaan in The Rocks, where the large rocks characterize the vineyard.
 2. The vineyards are dense in the best area of the Red Mountains.
 3. Marty Clubb owns L'Ecole 41 with his family and is one of the pioneers.
 4. Cristophe Baron keeps a low profile and does not accept visitors. Their tasting room in Walla Walla is permanently closed
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1. James Montone in his cellar where the bottles are stored in "pupitres" according to the champagne method.
 2. Hectic in Long Shadow's cellar before the harvest. Everything has to be ready when the grapes start to fall in.
 3. Devyani Gupta and Jesus Martinez Bujanda in Valdemar Estates' brand new winery