

# Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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## Inside this Issue

- 1 The Pacific Northwest
- 2 Tasting Notes
- 3 Tasting Notes
- 4 Tasting Notes

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## The Pacific Northwest

Within the U.S. wine industry, the Pacific Northwest trails only California in number of wineries, total wine production, acreage under vine, exports, and any other measure of significance you might care to mention. In quality and value, however, Washington and Oregon are closing the gap fast on their neighbor to the south and may well have surpassed the Golden State with some of their wines. Certainly the best Oregon Pinot Noir holds its own against any top flight California appellation, although, at the under \$30 level, California has more to offer in quantity, if not quality. In the major Bordeaux varietals, California rules at the upper price tiers. But at prices below, say, \$40, Washington State Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon compares favorably on price, quality, and value. Too many 'affordable' California reds these days are high alcohol, Parkerized, fruit bombs indistinguishable one from another. Those from Washington tend to not only have a more elegant balance, they more frequently have a sense of place, of *terroir*. And in some of the less popular varietals, the Pacific Northwest really shines. Oregon Pinot Gris ranks with the best the world offers from Alsace or the Italian Alps. Many Rieslings from Washington rival Germany's. Columbia Valley Syrah shows handsomely next to those of the Rhone. For value at the lower end of the market, companies like Columbia Crest or Hogue and brands like Red Diamond cannot be beat.

The wines we reviewed for this edition of Jim Hiller's Wine Club were better from top to bottom than those from any region we've looked at in our nearly ten year existence, except possibly those from Spain that we examined two years ago. In both cases we were delighted by the variety, the consistent quality, and the distinctiveness of the offerings.

## Washington State

The Cascades Mountains form a north-south barrier that divides Washington into two distinct climatic zones. The west is hilly and evergreen with an abundance of rainfall; the east lies in the rainshadow of the Cascades and is warm, dry, and sunny. Washington's vineyards are almost entirely irrigated, as 98% of them are in the state's eastern, mostly desert half. Rivers provide water and define most of the AVA borders. Among the state's geographic advantages are extra sunlight hours during the growing season (on average, two more hours a day than in California) and an extended autumn that allows grapes to hang well into October and even November so the fruit attains optimal ripening while maintaining natural acidity. Because sandy soils and cold winters have kept phylloxera at bay, virtually all eastern Washington's grapes grow on their own rootstocks while low humidity provides a virtually disease-free environment so less spraying is required than in many other areas of the world.

The state lies at approximately the same latitude as Germany. Although days are warm, nights are cool, and winters are very cold. Naturally, cold climate varieties like Riesling and Gewürztraminer do well, but so do reds because of the long days and extended sunshine. No cloud cover and no rain makes for warmer days than the latitude would indicate. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah are quite successful; Chardonnay is the most widely planted variety.

The Columbia Valley AVA is one of the largest in the country, covering one-third of the state and spilling into Oregon. Within this super-AVA are six others: Yakima Valley (within which are Red Mountain and Rattlesnake Hill), Horse Heaven Hills, Wahluke Slope, and Walla Walla Valley. Outside of Columbia Valley is Columbia Gorge and Puget Sound, the only AVA west of the Cascades.

**Oregon**

As in Washington State, the Cascades bisect Oregon into eastern and western halves. However, Oregon's Coastal Range provides a barrier to the cold and rain coming off the Pacific Ocean allowing vineyards to grow west of the Cascades. In fact, almost all of Oregon's vineyards are located in this north-south trough between the Coastal Range and the Cascades.

Oregon's maritime climate with mild winters poses little risk of the killing freezes that sometimes occur in Washington. The rainfall is much higher than in Washington but comes mostly before the growing season. The state's wine-growing reputation rests primarily on their outstanding Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris, although many other varieties including Chardonnay, Riesling and Merlot are grown as well.

The Oregonian equivalent to Washington's monster Columbia Valley appellation is the Willamette Valley AVA, extending from the Columbia River and the city of Portland 60 miles wide and 150 miles south to the city of Eugene with about 200 wineries and 10,000 acres planted, which produce about 60 percent of Oregon's wines. The north of the valley has wet winters, dry summers, and long, cool autumn days. Most of the grapes are planted on deep, well-drained, clay-loams on south-facing slopes. The southern portion of the Willamette gets significantly less rainfall. Soil types are similar. Within the Willamette are six other AVAs. South of the Willamette Valley is the Umpqua Valley. The soils are sandstone and sandy loams. Rainfall continues to diminish as you go south in Oregon, so the growing season progressively gets both warmer and drier.

The Rogue River Valley is located to the south of the Umpqua near the California border. Soils here are granite, sand, and clay alluvial; the climate is warm and dry.

**Tasting Notes**

**Taster's Table Whites**

**2006 Gordon Brothers Columbia Valley Sauvignon Blanc**

Tim Henley, who came from Napa Valley's esteemed Pine Ridge, exemplifies the European styling of many

Washington winemakers. The herbal nuances, higher acids, and restrained use of oak make this Sauvignon very like a fine white Bordeaux. Lush aromas of apricot and melon dominate the nose. The wine is fresh and crisp with flavors of tropical pineapple and citrus. Lively acids leave your tongue tingling pleasantly. It will pair wonderfully with shellfish, or serve as an aperitif. For a sensory delight, try this wine with a flavorful goat cheese. A 90 point *Wine Enthusiast* "Best Buy."

**2007 Chateau Ste Michelle Columbia Valley Pinot Gris**

This Pinot Gris falls between the lighter Italian Pinot Grigio style and the richer, rounder Pinot Gris of Alsace. The CSM offers fresh aromas and flavors of pear, fig and a hint of spice. Cooler sites of the Yakima Valley produced the grapes and a touch of Viognier contributed texture and an attractive floral character.

According to the winemaker, the region's sunny days and cool nights allow for gradual flavor development of the fruit and the well-drained soils enhance fruit character. Serve with scallops or halibut.

**2006 Hogue Columbia Valley Chardonnay**

"Polished in texture and refreshingly balanced with citrusy acidity, this modulates its lemon, apple and floral flavors beautifully," says *The Wine Spectator*. The nose shows aromas of pear, citrus vanilla, cream, and hazelnut. Bright pear and cream flavors abound on the palate with a roundness acquired from the barrel-fermented portion (31%). The finish is crisp. Thirty-four percent of this wine underwent malolactic fermentation following primary fermentation, and all of the new wine ages *sur lie* for five months in both French and American oak. The wine was lightly filtered then bottled and aged for a year before release. A Chardonnay of complex character, this would be a great accompaniment to broiled salmon or fettuccini with a white clam sauce.

**2006 Kamiak Cellar Select Columbia Valley White Wine**

From Gordon Brothers Cellars of Pasco, the Kamiak white is a delightful and well-crafted blend of two thirds

sauvignon blanc, one third chardonnay, and a splash of gewürztraminer that lifts the aromatics. The Chard provides a soft luscious background and the Sauvignon gives the wine its natural acidity and crisp citrus flavors. There are lovely aromas of pineapple and honey in the nose. Light and delicate with satiny mouth-feel, flavors on the palate include Granny Smith apple, melon and citrus. It closes with a smooth, lingering finish of almond and butterscotch.

**2007 Charles Smith Kung Fu Girl Riesling**

Even if this wine did not have the coolest label I've seen in the past year, it would still have been a slam dunk for the Wine Club on the basis of its pure, delicious Riesling character. Single vineyard Riesling grown in rocky soils of fragmented basalt, and caliche yields classic Riesling with a sublime minerality. Beautiful aromas of delicate spring blossoms, white apricot and peach lead into explosive concentrated flavors and a long fresh finish. Sealed with a screwcap, dry-tasting but actually off-dry at 1.66 percent residual sugar, Kungfu Girl is certain to start turning up at Thai and sushi restaurants all over town.

**2006 Pacific Rim Gewurztraminer**

Pacific Rim uses exclusively stainless steel tanks. The grapes that comprise the 2006 Gewurztraminer are sourced entirely from the cool climate of Yakima Valley in Eastern Washington where Gewurztraminer can ripen fully while maintaining its acidity. The winemaker leaves the juice and the grape skins in extended contact to extract and unleash the exquisite Gewurztraminer aromas locked in the skin. The juice is then cold temperature fermented over 20 days. Pacific Rim does not use any oak or malolactic fermentation. The wine is crisp with a slight residual sugar of 1.7% with flavors of lychee, melon and tangerine. This is an exceptional match with spicy Indian food, lemon chicken and blue cheeses.

**Taster's Table Reds**

**2004 Columbia Crest Two Vines Shiraz**

*The Wine Spectator* rated the Two Vines Shiraz a "Best Buy" and a top "Food

Friendly Wine;" *The Wine Advocate* placed it #54 on its list of the "Top 100 Best Buys 2007." It features the Syrah grapes's fruit-forward ripe, jammy fruitiness with black cherry and white pepper aromatics and flavors of boysenberry and raspberry on the palate. Grenache and a hint of Viognier, varieties traditional in the Rhone Valley, complete the blend and enhance the mouthfeel and fruit aromatics.

#### **2004 A to Z Wineworks Night and Day Oregon Red Wine**

The A to Z people are very secretive on the bottle and on their website about the composition and vinification of this "select blend of big red varieties from Southern Oregon," but they do provide this accurate, if florid, description: "Saturated dark purple/red color from rim to center that looks like a Bordeaux from a great vintage. The nose shows strong minerality and has complex initial aromas of blackberries, tobacco, pepper, iron, graphite, cassis and tar. With aeration aromas of cedar, Indian spices, bramble, boysenberries, blood orange, ripe plums and red currants emerge. In the mouth the attack is concentrated, structured and pure. As the wine continues to move across the palate, ripe tannins focus and bring balance to the young and generous fruit. The mid-palate is focused, strong and broad. At the end, a classic tannin/fruit balance gives the finish great clarity and astounding length. The final flavors end on a strong note of iron and minerality."

#### **2006 Hogue Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon**

Labeled simply as a Columbia Valley Cab, the Hogue is, in fact, a blend of 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Syrah, 3% Cabernet Franc, and 2% Merlot, the fruit sourced from three growing regions, 56% from the Horse Heaven Hills, 30% from the Yakima Valley, and 14% from the Wahluke Slope. It is a full, fruity wine with intense aromas of black cherry, anise and vanilla, flavors of dark fruit, caramel and cocoa, and firm structure. An 87 point "Best Value" in *The Wine Spectator*, it was described there as "Smooth, polished and appealing with its juicy plum and currant fruit, lingering softly on the finish." This Cabernet

Sauvignon is an excellent companion to steak and pastas with a robust red sauce or, for a special treat, try it with dark chocolate.

#### **2005 Red Diamond Cabernet Sauvignon**

The Red Diamond brand began life as a Merlot marketed solely to the restaurant trade. It saw such success, however, that a Cabernet Sauvignon was introduced in 2004 and the wines were marketed to off-premise as well as on-premise licensees. In the 05 Cab, aromas of black cherry, blackberries, liqueur and hints of tobacco and smoke precede a rich, silky palate of cherry, chocolate and black fruits with a touch of toasty oak on the finish. A hint of Merlot (2%) was blended to the final wine to deliver a more layered mid-palate.

#### **2006 Charles Smith Holy Cow Merlot**

A beautiful example of Merlot from some of the finest sites in the Columbia Valley, all the Holy Cow fruit comes from areas of warm days and cool nighttime temperatures. The three vineyards used are Sundance, located on the Wahluke slope, a slight northerly slope that provides a cooler spot in an otherwise warm region. Clifton Hill is also in the Wahluke Slope AVA, but is on the western edge, with very good drainage. Snipes Road Vineyard, in the Yakima Valley AVA, is on some of the highest irrigated elevations on the south slope of the Rattlesnake Hills. Aromas of sweet cherry, pipe tobacco, and spice lead to a medium-bodied, velvety smooth and very tasty Merlot.

#### **2006 Snoqualmie Columbia Valley Merlot**

Locals reputedly describe Snoqualmie's wines as "Naturally Northwest," offering a classic varietal flavor profile, while reflecting the unique terroir of specific appellations within the Columbia Valley. Celebrated winemaker Joy Anderson extracts the natural fruit flavors to create distinctive wines with bright, bold tastes. This Merlot bursts with aromas of dark black cherry fruit, clove spice and sweet oak, followed on the palate by bright acidic structure and luscious, round tannins. Perfect food pairings: pepper-

crusted lamb, barbecued steak, gourmet burgers

#### **Collector's Club Whites**

##### **2007 WillaKenzie Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Blanc**

This Pinot Blanc is made in entirely in stainless steel, with no malolactic fermentation and no barrel aging. The 2007 vintage was very challenging, with rains throughout the harvest but WillaKenzie used a cold storage facility to dry and dehydrate the grapes before processing them. The result was a fresh, crisp wine of great concentration, ripe tannins and lower levels of alcohol. With an attractive pale straw color, the wine shows aromas of pear, grapefruit and green apple followed by hints of lemongrass and orange blossom. The initial palate impression displays a surprising touch of sweetness with flavors of peach, apricot and citrus, carried by bright acidity through the long finish.

##### **2007 Elk Cove Willamette Valley Pinot Gris**

A 91 point "Editor's Choice," *The Wine Enthusiast* said of the Elk Cove, "This is a fruit powered wine, loaded with fresh pear, melon, and tropical flavors. It shows no sign of having suffered from the wet, cool weather that hit Oregon during the 2007 harvest. It seems riper than the perfectly balanced '06 bottling, with lower acids, and a streak of vanilla and coconut wrapping up the finish." All of Elk Cove's white wine grapes are gently whole cluster pressed, then fermented extremely cool in small stainless steel tanks, which accentuates aromatics and enhances the richness and viscosity. To retain freshness and varietal correctness they are not put through malolactic fermentation. The wine starts out with pineapple, pear, apple and honeysuckle aromatics, while also giving crispness on the palate with citrus and grapefruit. The palate shows a rich mouthfeel leading to a full and satisfying balanced finish

##### **2006 Chateau Ste Michelle Canoe Ridge Chardonnay**

This Chardonnay is fresh, vibrant and elegant delivering fresh apple, ripe pear and spice aromas and flavors. The finish

is elegant and refined with light spice notes, which are a result of the restrained French oak treatment. The vineyard at Canoe Ridge Estate lies on the north bank of the Columbia River in Washington state's Horse Heaven Hills AVA, an ideal site for Chardonnay. The site's proximity to the river protects it from temperature extremes, allowing uniform ripening and excellent color development. Soils are sandy with bits of cobblestone and have low water-holding capacity, enabling precise control of vine growth through drip irrigation and canopy management. Young vines in search of water and nutrients easily establish deep root systems here.

**2007 Lemelson "Tikka's Run" Pinot Gris**

The Tikka's Run Pinot Gris boasts a nose of white peach, papaya, Asian pear and green apple with a nice complement of sweet baking spice and lime. Alsatian in style, the full-bodied palate shows honey and quince and a breadlike quality that is reminiscent of a lemon scone or perhaps lemon meringue pie. The finish is crisp, fresh, and long.

**2006 Walnut City Wineworks Viognier**

Only a thousand cases were made of this complex, multi-layered Viognier with vibrant aromas of white peach, green apple peel, and anise. Mouth-filling and rich on the palate, it shows flavors of dried pineapple, ginger, coconut, kiwi and edges of lemongrass. The finish is clean with tropical notes and a bright nectarine acidity.

**2007 Pacific Rim Wallula Riesling**

Sitting atop 1,000 foot cliffs that soar above the Columbia River, Wallula Vineyard is a stunning location and boasts soils ideal for growing world-class Riesling. Here is a beautifully structured and crisp wine with bright acidity and perfect balance. The wine shows some apricot and pineapple with racy lime and apple flavors. It is very fresh and lively, tasting dry. The wine has great acidity with some apple fruit and nutmeg notes. This wine, fermented with its native yeasts, pairs nicely with grilled seafood or spring salads.

**Collector's Club Reds**

**2005 Chateau Ste Michelle Indian Wells Cabernet**

The Indian Wells Cabernet is sourced from vineyards throughout the Wahluke Slope, one of the most northern growing areas in Washington state. Bordered on both the west and the south by the Columbia River, the region is a consistent producer of high quality, ripe fruit, yielding wine with intense color and flavor. Lush, bold, and fruit-forward, the wine exudes sweet blackberry pie and vanilla aromas and flavors with loads of complexity. Meant to enjoy in its youth, try it with shish kabobs, a flat iron steak or even with a nibble of dark chocolate.

**2005 Seven Hills Walla Walla Valley Syrah**

The Seven Hills is a big, meaty Syrah that has earned rave reviews from all over. It shows aromas of cassis, black cherry, black pepper, lavender and spice in the nose. Smoky Syrah notes dominate the palate with ripe red fruits, orange peel, pepper and vanilla accents. Sweet spice and minerals on a finish framed by plush tannins persist nicely. Bottled after aging for 18 months in primarily French oak, about 35% new, this wine is made with 91% Syrah and 9% Merlot. A terrific match for a roasted leg of lamb.

**2007 Walnut City Wineworks Willamette Valley Pinot Noir**

Showing a brilliant red color and a nose with spice, earth, and cinnamon highlights, the WCW Pinot is medium-bodied and well-balanced on the palate, a mouth full of bright red and black cherry with hints of raspberry, strawberry, cinnamon, and earth. A wine of great purity and enticing complexity, it has a long and satisfying, fruit-filled finish showing only a hint of oak.

**2006 Anne Amie Cuvée A Pinot Noir**

A classic Oregon pinot noir, the 2006 Cuvée A is dark garnet in color, the bouquet is filled with aromas of spices, fresh black raspberries and hints of toasty oak. On the palate it is racy and firm with flavors laced with cranberries and bittersweet black cherries highlighted with touches of fresh sage and cinnamon. The finish is lively and long with a clean freshness. *Wine & Spirits* rated this a 90

point wine saying, "Scents of loamy soils and dark strawberry play tug of war in this brisk, bright pinot. The flavors descend more into black cherry, and the tannins pull the wine back to its earth element."

**2004 Matthews Columbia Valley Claret**

Each vintage, winemaker Matthew Loso produces a limited-production, age-worthy blend named the Matthews Red Wine. In the Bordelaise tradition, he also makes a Claret, assembled from declassified lots that do not meet the rigorous quality standards of the Red Wine and styled for more immediate consumption. For the 2004 vintage, none of the available lots met these high standards, so all 40 barrels of the 2004 Columbia Valley Red Wine were declassified to become the backbone blend of this spectacular wine. Very dark in color with intense fruit extraction and a velvety long finish, the Matthews Claret is a blend of 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Franc, 4% Malbec and 1% Syrah.

**2005 Hedges Family Estate Red Mountain Three Vineyards**

Red Mountain is arguably Washington's most well-defined and distinctive wine growing area. The soil isn't red, and there's really no mountain. But Red Mountain's sagebrush-rampant 4,000 acres in the Yakima Valley were deemed unique enough in 2001 to be designated by the federal government as an American Viticulture Area. The smallest and one of the hottest of the AVAs in the state, Red Mountain is known particularly for its Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah. The long, sunny summer days and cool nights produce thick-skinned grapes capable of showing deep, dense color, firm yet supple tannins, and well defined acidity. The Hedges Three Vineyards, a blend of fruit from three estate vineyards and composed of 36% Cabernet Sauvignon, 61% Merlot, and 3% Cabernet Franc is a wonderful example of the distinctive, concentrated Red Mountain taste. Bordeaux-like in composition and in style (no surprise as Anne-Marie Hedges' family hails from France), this wine has the potential to age gracefully for 5 to 10 years.