

(vin voyage)



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# THE PROMISED STATE

From Seattle to Walla Walla, David Williams explores the dynamic, creative winemaking scene in Washington State and meets some of the passionate individuals who have helped shape its extraordinary rise

This was not the usual collection of cellar hands. These were not itinerant laborers, young backpacking students, or junior winemakers. Mostly in their 50s and dressed down in impeccably laundered leisure-wear, these were business leaders, academics, lawyers, and doctors—in other words, highly qualified, high-earning professionals, cheerfully busying themselves with the menial, physically exhausting tasks required by a winery at harvest time: sorting grapes, shifting vats and grape bins, picking out leaves, filling tanks, and driving forklift trucks. All were volunteers, working for nothing but the thrill of proximity to winemaking, of observing a winemaker as he deals with the many thousands of calculations and calibrations demanded by the crush.

## Volunteer workforce

At first, this scene at the small-scale Betz Family Winery made me think of the famous episode of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* where the hero, faced with the disagreeable job of whitewashing a long stretch of fence, hits upon the idea of touting the task as a pleasure, offering the "rights" to do the work to the gullible kids of his neighborhood in exchange for payment in marbles, apples, tin soldiers, or whatever else the kids could lay their hands on. In this instance, the role of Sawyer would be played by Bob Betz MW, the softly spoken Kris Kristofferson lookalike who founded, owns, and runs Betz Family Winery. But really, Betz, who was more than a little busy himself, didn't have to do that much of a hard sell on his team of volunteers. (Nor, I should point out, did he accept any money from them—though such was the unaffected enthusiasm, I got the impression he could have.) As he says, "We couldn't do it without them, but we're very lucky here to have so many people, really very smart people, who just want to get involved in the industry in some way."

In any case, Betz is far from the only producer in Woodinville to draw on this source of upscale, unpaid labor; most of the many boutique producers based here, as well as in other outlying suburbs of Seattle, rely on it. That so many people are willing to give their time freely is explained to some degree by their desire to get close to the perceived stardust of the wine industry. Many of the volunteers are also doubtless motivated by the physical release that manual work offers the deskbound white-collar worker—the same feeling that turns people into weekend gardeners or inspires them to take working holidays building dry-stone walls.

But I don't think I'd be overstating the case by saying that something more profound was going on here. Something

about the atmosphere at Betz—something in the "we're all in it together" attitude and the good-humored industriousness—called to mind a charitable fund-raiser in a small town: a fun run, say, or backstage at an amateur theater performance. As Betz says, "The people feel proud of the wine industry here, and they want to be part of it and to see it work." And that's exactly it. It's almost as if working the vintage was a civic duty for Seattle's liberal middle classes—or, at the very least, an expression of their civic pride.

## Seattle—the promised city

The relationship between the Washington wine industry and Seattle's increasingly cosmopolitan middle class goes much deeper even than this rather charming expression of good citizenship. Indeed, it's hard to imagine Washington wine existing in its current form—and certainly in its current size and at its current rate of growth—without the middle class. It's impossible to understand the development of the Washington wine industry—from, in the words of Betz, "a dot on the landscape, to something really worthwhile"—without some understanding of how it corresponds with the rapid demographic change that has overtaken the city in the same time frame.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Washington State had no commercial wine industry to speak of. While grapes were grown in the sparsely populated plains in Eastern Washington, across the Cascade Mountains from Seattle, they were almost exclusively Concord, destined for the grocery trade. The first tentative steps into quality wine production using *Vitis vinifera* were made in the 1960s, but by the end of the decade there were still only two bonded wineries. By the end of the following decade, that figure had climbed into double digits, and by the end of the 1990s, it had reached 150. Today, as I was repeatedly reminded during my week-long stay in Washington State, there are more than 650 wineries, and, to adopt the slightly hyperbolic tone in which these things tend to be discussed, a new one is registered every 15 days.

Now consider the recent history of Seattle. For much of its existence, this city was regarded by the rest of the United States—and, as I understand it, with a certain prickly pride by its own citizens—as a distant backwater. Airplane construction, in the shape of Boeing, was easily the most significant industry, and the city had a distinctly unionized, blue-collar flavor. Then, during the Reagan era, and almost imperceptibly at first, things began to change. In *Meeting Mr Heartbreak*, his book recounting a journey across the USA, British writer and, since



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1990, Seattle resident Jonathan Raban says: “By the end of the 1980s, Seattle had taken on the dangerous luster of a promised city. The rumor had gone out that if you had failed in Detroit you might yet succeed in Seattle—and that if you’d succeeded in Seoul, you could succeed even better in Seattle [...]. Seattle was the coming place. So I joined the line of hopefuls.”

Raban wasn’t the only one to pick up on the vibes. The years following his arrival in Seattle saw the emergence and consolidation of a clutch of Seattle-based companies as icons of modern corporate America: Microsoft (which relocated from New Mexico to Seattle in 1985), Starbucks (which was founded in the city in 1971 but began its rapid global expansion in the 1990s), and Amazon (founded in a Seattle garage in 1994). Around the same period, Seattle also began to attract global attention for its music: The onomatopoeically named grunge scene gave the world Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden, among others, not to mention an entire grubby aesthetic for a generation of American teenagers and 20-somethings.

In a recent interview in *The Guardian* newspaper, Raban summed up the enormous changes wrought on his adopted city by the arrival of the “new economy,” and the influx of highly educated workers in its wake, describing contemporary Seattle as “top-heavy with Ph.D.s.” The phrase stuck with me as I meandered around the compact city center. To European eyes—or, at least, to these impressionable, liberal European eyes on a warm, sunny, early-autumn day—downtown Seattle seems like a model of how you always hoped an American city would be. Its spectacular setting—on the shores of Elliott Bay, with the Olympic Mountains to the west and the Cascades behind the skyscrapers to the east—contributes to this idea. But it’s the energy of the place at street level that is most attractive, in the numerous delis and restaurants and the funky, independent book and record stores. You soon get the impression that this is a wealthy place but also a cultured and tolerant one. Seattle is a city that seems to have pulled off the trick of encouraging creativity in business while somehow minimizing the socially corrosive effects that so often accompany it. Of course, like any other large city, Seattle has its social problems. It is immediately apparent, for example, that there is quite a conspicuous homeless population. But as Raban has suggested, Seattle’s distinctive character is best revealed by the fact that its most impressive new building—conceived by renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and financed at huge cost by the state government after a public vote—is an enormous public library.

My point here is not simply to suggest that Seattle offers what seems to the visitor a great place to live (though after just a few days there, I could well imagine myself joining Raban’s line of hopefuls) but rather to show how the city has, demographically speaking, developed the perfect conditions for a wine industry to thrive in. And I don’t mean simply that its enophile classes combine to provide Washington wine producers with their most important market (though the majority of producers, particularly the boutique players, do indeed sell the majority of their wares in the city and the rest of King County). No, the Seattle character—that mix of creative, dynamic entrepreneurialism and social awareness—

has spilled into the Washington wine industry in a number of other important ways, too. According to Ben Smith, owner and winemaker at one of the state’s best producers, Cadence, a 2,500-case winery that operates out of a warehouse in south Seattle, there has always been a “collegiate” spirit to the wine scene here. People are happy to help each other, in other words, to share their experience, as Smith himself has done by mentoring his neighbor Tim Sorenson at Fall Line.

Smith and Sorenson are also representative of another way in which the culture of middle-class Seattle has seeped into the wine business. Both are examples of the do-it-yourself ethos that is so strong here, having started out making wine as a hobby while working as an engineer for Boeing (in the case of Smith) and as an economics lecturer (in the case of Sorenson, who still holds down his day job). In both cases, as Sorenson puts it, the hobby “just increasingly took over as I got more and more passionate about wine.” And it’s remarkable how many other top Washington winemakers have a similar tale to tell, being émigrés from different professions. Nota Bene Cellars’ Tim Narby is a former systems analyst at Boeing and one-time member of the same Boeing Wine & Beer-making Club as Smith; ex-restaurateur Chris Upchurch spent 18 years as an amateur winemaker before joining DeLille Estate; and Chris Camarda, of Andrew Will, worked 20 years in the restaurant trade before starting his winery in 1989. Indeed, it was a group of hobbyists who founded the first premium wine producer in the state, Associated Vintners, in the early 1960s. Now known as Columbia Winery, the company was the project of ten amateur wine-enthusiast friends, including six professors from the University of Washington, and produced its first wines in a suburban garage in the Seattle suburb of Laurelhurst. *Plus ça change...*

### Into the desert

For many visitors to Washington State, the wineries of Seattle—or, more specifically, what Gary Werner, the former journalist who heads up the communications department at the Washington Wine Commission, calls the “enormous vitrine” of Woodinville—are the only contact they ever have with the local wine industry. And you could spend several happy days touring the 45 producers (though more seem to be added every day) that have a winery, tasting facilities, or both in the area. There’s even a superb hotel, the Washington State Resort & Willows Lodge, on hand, so you don’t have to make the 30-minute drive to and from downtown Seattle. But while Woodinville will give you a good idea of the flavor and feel of Washington wine, it certainly won’t give you the whole story. Seattle is to Washington wine what Vila Nova de Gaia is to Port: a hugely important influence on its culture, production, and trade. To understand Washington wine fully, though, you must also travel across the cultural and physical divide of the Cascade Mountains to Washington’s equivalent of the Douro, where the overwhelming majority of the vines are grown: Eastern Washington.

I wouldn’t be the first to remark that Eastern Washington feels almost like a different country—or at the very least, a different state—from Seattle and the rest of Washington. The



Leonetti Cellars now produces all of its wines from its own vineyards, including Loess Vineyard (above) in Walla Walla Valley

differences struck me from the moment I got off the plane after an hour-long flight to Walla Walla, in the far southeast of Washington State, toward the border with Oregon. The air felt different, as it should do when you consider that Walla Walla, like the rest of Eastern Washington, is essentially desert, with an average of just 12.5in (32cm) of rain a year, compared to 36in (91cm) in Seattle. The terrain was accordingly different, too, the mountains, lakes, and pine forests of the west replaced by gently undulating sage-brush scrubland interspersed with irrigated agricultural crops such as wheat, the locally renowned and trademarked Walla Walla sweet onions, and, in sudden rigidly geometric bursts of green, vines—more than 1,600 acres (650ha) of them according to my Washington Wine Commission handbook, though others put the figure closer to 2,000 acres (800ha).

The small town of Walla Walla (population 29,686), the eponymous valley's regional hub, has inevitably been changed by the sudden growth of its wine industry. There are now more than 100 wineries based in the Walla Walla Valley AVA, most of them added in the past decade. Many of them have tasting rooms, either on Walla Walla's well-preserved, archetypal Main Street or dotted around the rest of the town center. Wine tourism is picking up, too, bringing around \$100 million a year to the town's lodges, B&Bs, hotels, and restaurants.

For all that, to me Walla Walla still felt a long way, in all senses, from Seattle. Yes, there's a Starbucks, but then, where in the world isn't there a Starbucks? Walla Walla felt like a farming town, with all the sleepiness that that implies. However, as suggested by Mike Corliss, the Seattle property magnate behind Corliss Estates, one of Walla Walla's most

impressive recent operations, those appearances are deceptive. "The place has an energy," Corliss says. "It had that energy when my wife and I first came here for a long weekend [at the end of the 1990s]. At that time, there were only 30 wineries, but you could feel something about the town."

Chris Figgins, winemaker and CEO at Leonetti Cellars, the first winery established in Walla Walla in 1977, is a fine example of the energy Corliss is talking about. As he takes me on a tour of his vineyards, he lets rip a constant flow of information, ideas, and improvised lectures, mostly on his pet subject: sustainable farming: "You know, nutrition in food has gone down by 40–50 percent since chemicals were introduced," Figgins says at one point. "They—people like Monsanto—sell the poison and the cure. It's an amazing business model! It means that when we buy the soil, we have to repair it to get a sustainable biological population. And there is a linear relationship between biologically active soils and the quality of the finished wine and fruit. More than half the vine mass is below the ground," he continues. "It's below the ground that the good stuff happens."

You don't have to spend very long with Figgins to realize that his passion lies very much in the vineyards. And you may think this confirms a stereotypical view many have of the Washington wine industry—the notion that there is a divide between Eastern Washington's farmers and Seattle's sophisticated winemaking city slickers, the idea that "we grow the fruit here, and they crush it and drink it over there."

You can certainly see why that view may have taken hold. The history of Washington wine has been colored as much by the work of far-sighted Eastern Washington growers—many of them converts from the other forms of agriculture that still

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dominate farming in Washington, such as hops, apples, and cherries—as it has been by winemakers. And the star growers of Eastern Washington—people such as Mike Sauer of Red Willow, Dick Boushey of Boushey Vineyards, Patricia and David Gelles at Klipsun, Paul and Judy Champoux of Champoux Vineyards, and Jim Holmes of Ciel du Cheval—have, for the most part, been happy to steer clear of winemaking, letting their grapes do their talking for them, knowing that the names of their vineyards have been, and remain, strong brands—arguably stronger brands than the wineries that use their fruit. So strong, in fact, that at the very best sites, wineries have, in effect, to audition to use their fruit; the growers won't sell to just anyone.

It's true, too, that winemakers have, by and large, been happy with the arrangement, particularly at the better vineyards, because the standard of the viticulture is generally high, and the growers are happy to work to a winery's specifications. In 2009, Corliss planted his own vineyard in the much sought-after Red Mountain AVA, a couple of hours' drive west from Walla Walla, in the Yakima Valley. He says, "The current plan is not to source 100 percent from vineyards we own. When you ask someone to plant on their own land and you manage it, it's the same end result."

But the distinction between winemaker and wine grower is far less acute than is sometimes made out. Among the people I visited were winemakers (such as Corliss and Smith) who had recently planted their own vineyards, as well as farmers—both local (such as Butch Millbrandt of Millbrandt Vineyards or the Olsen family of the eponymous estate) and from farther afield (such as the brothers-in-law behind the very promising Dusted Valley, who came to Walla Walla from Wisconsin, where they also maintain a rare-breed pig farm)—who are making their own wine. And there were other operations, too, such as the pioneers of Red Mountain, Hedges Family Estate, which has for some time combined both winemaking and wine growing.

Indeed, I got the distinct impression, as my trip progressed, that many producers are coming around to the view of Paul McBride, a partner in Grand Rêve: "Long term, if you're going to make a Pétus, you need to own the vineyard and understand the vineyard." Grand Rêve is an ambitious, idiosyncratic project that uses a cast of Washington's best winemakers to make its wines in their own wineries, using fruit supplied by McBride and his partner Ryan Smith, the vineyard manager at Ciel du Cheval. True to McBride's word, the project will be looking to source its fruit from its own vineyard, planted in 2007 on Red Mountain. Until now, all the fruit has been sourced by Smith from Ciel du Cheval.

But there's a further point to be made here, and one that brings us back to Leonetti. It's true that many of Washington's most celebrated and longest-established wineries have their headquarters in Western Washington. It's true, too, that all of the state's best growers have by necessity been from, or at least based in, the east. But those two facts shouldn't overshadow the influence that Eastern Washingtonians have historically had on winemaking in the state. As we left the vineyard at Leonetti and began our tour of the winery, Figgins—a winemaker and viticulturist—showed me some of the

winemaking kit made by his father, Leonetti founder Gary Figgins. The items were made when Figgins senior was still a machinist in the local cannery in the 1970s, experimenting in amateur winemaking with his friend Rick Small, the founder of Woodward Canyon. This was a symbol, certainly, of how far these two great producers have come. But it was a reminder, too, that the pioneering DIY winemaking spirit has been as important out here, amid Walla Walla's working and farming classes, as it has been back in Seattle.

### *Grands projets*

Piero Antinori describes Col Solare—his Red Mountain-based joint venture with Washington State's largest producer, Chateau Ste Michelle—as a "Washington wine with a Tuscan soul." Based on the wine alone, it's a somewhat fanciful description. To the blind-taster, this Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend (the 2006 is 72 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 19 percent Merlot, plus tiny portions of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Syrah) is quintessential Washington, all big, bright fruit perched atop the muscular tannins associated particularly with the Red Mountain AVA, and it's none the worse for it. But the winery—with its 300ft- (90m-) long, 25ft- (8m-) high stone wall snaking along the slope, and a belltower that could have been imported from San Gimignano and reconstructed brick-by-brick—is a different matter. In its isolation on the slopes of Red Mountain, with its views across the Columbia Valley, the effect is disorienting, as if you're not quite in Tuscany and not quite in the USA.

I arrived at Col Solare in the early evening, and at that time of day you appreciate keenly one of the biggest attractions of the region for wine producers. The temperature, which had been running in the mid-80s F (30°C) all day, plummeted with the sun. By the time I was leaving, at around 9pm, it had already fallen from T-shirt- to jumper-wearing levels. But that's not at all unusual. I was told that on many days the gap between the highest and lowest temperatures can be as much as 40°F (22°C). Claims for impressive thermic amplitude are repeated in the world's wine regions with a ubiquity that borders on the platitudinous, but the principle does matter. And in the Columbia Valley, with its unusually long, hot days, it matters a great deal: It's the cold nights that, in the best examples, give that distinctively vivacious Washingtonian brightness to what would otherwise be bruisingly powerful, flabby wines.

Col Solare is one of wine's Old World/New World collaborative *grands projets*, and in the manner of other examples of the genre, such as Almaviva or Opus One, there is a slight whiff of self-importance about it. The publicity, for example, is all about "making Washington State's best wine"—as if it were a matter of simply declaring an intention to do so and finding the necessary funds to fill in the blanks. But the wines are well made by the not-at-all pompous team of Antinori's Renzo Cotarella, Ste Michelle's head winemaker Doug Gore, and resident winemaker Marcus Notaro. The inevitably ample new oak is used judiciously, and as a small vertical of vintages stretching back to the mid-1990s (the first vintage was 1995) showed, they age well, too. It will be intriguing to see how the wines develop once they start

incorporating the estate fruit grown in the 30-acre (12ha) vineyard surrounding the winery, planted in consultation with Dick Boushey.

I'll be interested, too, to see whether success is granted to another of Washington's more recent *grands projets*—one that also has links with Chateau Ste Michelle and loudly proclaims its aspirations to greatness. Long Shadows is the work of Allen Shoup, the engagingly intelligent former CEO of Ste Michelle. When I met Shoup at the project's headquarters in Walla Walla, he explicitly invoked the specter of Opus One and the spirit of Robert Mondavi, whom Shoup regarded as a mentor. "At a time when Napa was struggling for recognition, Opus One came along, and I believe it was somewhat the reason Napa was proclaimed with the status it was," he says. The idea this time, in a manner reminiscent of the Grand Rêve project described above, is to have not so much a single winery but a "collection" of wineries, each a discrete joint venture between Shoup and a different big-name winemaker from around the world.

The starry team he's assembled includes Armin Diel, Randy Dunn, John Duval, the Folonaris, Augustin Huneeus, Philippe Melka, and Michel Rolland. Each owns a stake in their "brand," with each acting as a de facto consultant to the project's overseeing winemaker, Gilles Nicault. Formerly of Woodward Canyon, Nicault, a Frenchman with an intimate knowledge of Washington State, works in tandem with the different members, helping them source fruit from across the Columbia Valley and making sure their different winemaking requirements (including specific equipment) are met. He also has his own wine in the series to play with, a Bordeaux-plus-Syrah blend.

It's an intriguing project, but so far, at least, I don't think it's quite succeeded, at least on its own terms. The highlight of the series for me was Diel's appealingly mineral, crystal-clear, dry Poet's Leap Riesling, if for no other reason than it being completely distinct from the other wines on offer (and as the only white, you would expect it to be!). The rest of the line is comprised of perfectly well-made, bright, glossy reds, but there was a certain similarity between them—a house style, if you like. That could well have been the power of suggestion, and had the wines been presented to me as a range in the traditional sense, I wonder if it would even have occurred to me as a criticism. But the line clearly didn't do much to support the cult of the winemaker that Shoup seems determined to promote.

In any case, I'm not convinced that this kind of part-time, Harlem Globetrotters-style engagement will ever lead to the most interesting wines, wherever they're produced. In Washington, as surely as in the rest of the world, the most entrancing wines are always the products of passionate, often eccentric individuals or small teams, working with dedication and complete attention on small productions—the kinds of people who, even if they do not own any vineyards, know exactly what kind of fruit they're looking for and have a vision of what they want to do with it. I'm thinking, in Washington, of people like Chris Camarda of Andrew Will, Ben Smith and Gaye McNutt at Cadence, Rick Small at

Woodward Canyon, Chris Upchurch and Jay Soloff at DeLille, Gary and Chris Figgins at Leonetti, Christophe Baron at Cayuse, Greg and Pam Harrington at Gramercy Cellars, David O'Reilly of Owen Roe, Brennon Leighton at EFESTE, and Bob Betz—all very different individuals with very different ideas united by one thing: They're making wine because they felt they had to. ■

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