

New Hybrid Wines Merge Washington and Oregon Grapes

Brian and Rob McCormick use grapes from both Washington and Oregon to make their Melamoose wines

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Image Credit: Laurie Black

When it comes to making great wine, father and son Rob and Brian McCormick of Memaloose Wines in Lyle, Washington, are working both sides of the Washington/Oregon border against the middle—of the Columbia River. In the exact “middle”—geographically, at least—of their five estate vineyards (two in Oregon, three in Washington) is Memaloose Island, the inspiration for their winery’s name.

The McCormicks’ vineyards are all within the Columbia Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA), and all—even the two in Oregon—grow grapes for their Washington wines. The vineyards are Hannah’s Bench in Lyle (2 1/2 acres, 800 feet in elevation); the certified organic Idiot’s Grace Vineyard east of Mosier, Oregon (7 acres, 300 feet); the Annex near Mosier (2 1/2 acres, 200 feet); Parker’s Vineyard on the Mistral Bench in Lyle (1 acre, 1,000 feet); and the newest, Hamm’s Vineyard in Lyle (3 1/2 acres, 600 feet). From these five sites, the McCormicks grow a stunning array of varieties, including Grenache, Primitivo, Barbera, Dolcetto, Gamay, Sauvignon Blanc and Sangiovese, studying what these special vineyards will produce, given cool nights, hot days and the mineral-rich soils of the Columbia Gorge.

“The Gorge represents a transition zone between the cooler-climate Pinot Noir of Oregon and the warmer-site, higher-alcohol reds of the Columbia Valley,” says winemaker Brian McCormick. “We are experimenting with many varieties, trying to tame the ripeness of the hotter climate and still get elements of structure into the wine.” Through all of this, they are working toward a goal of creating balanced, delicious, food-friendly wines that are a true expression of this unique place.

The McCormicks aren’t alone in their fascination with finding the perfect site to grow wine grapes, no matter where it may lie on the map. Many winemakers have sourced fruit from both sides of the Washington/Oregon border for years. The Walla Walla AVA, for instance, spills over into Oregon, just as the Columbia Gorge AVA does. In 1994, Norm McKibben (Pepper Bridge Winery) bought the 20-acre Seven Hills Vineyard, near Milton-Freewater, Oregon, and, in partnership with co-owners Gary a (Leonetti Winery), Marty Clubb (L’Ecole No. 41 Winery) and Bob Rugar of the Walla Walla Watershed Alliance, expanded the vineyard to 200 acres. The three partner wineries use about half of this premium-quality fruit, which is sold to—and in high demand from—many other premium Washington wineries.

One of them is Lost River Winery, in Winthrop, Washington, where winemaker and owner John Morgan makes a Syrah that is a true Washington/Oregon wine. Fifty percent of the fruit comes from Stone Valley Vineyard, part of the original Seven Hills Vineyard on the Oregon side of the Walla Walla Valley AVA. “I was always excited about the wines that Christophe Baron of Cayuse was making with fruit from ‘the Rocks,’” says Morgan, referring to the gravel—and larger—rock composition of this fascinating vineyard. “The fruit has a bright, sharp, dark fruit, a mineral edge, and it is a nice complement to the very earthy, meaty, roasted coffee flavors of the fruit from Les Collines Vineyard,” which makes up the other half of the wine.

Just over the border in Washington, Les Collines is also well-known for its Syrah, and its soil has a thick—what Morgan calls “bottomless”—layer of loess, or blown-in silt that holds more moisture and less heat than the grapefruit-sized basalt cobbles of Stone Valley. “The Rocks heat up later in the day and hold their heat later into the evening,” says Morgan. “Our fruit was ripe right on time this year, while a lot of the rest of the valley was ripe weeks later.”

As the demand for Washington reds such as Cabernet Franc (which is not well known in Oregon) continues to grow, it is a good decision to market these wines as “Washington,” (provided that 95 percent of the fruit used is from Washington, as the law requires). But if not enough fruit from either states is used to declare it a Washington or Oregon wine, the label will show simply the AVA where the fruit was grown, such as Columbia Valley, Walla Walla Valley or Columbia Gorge, all of which straddle the border.

Although the mighty Columbia River is a formidable boundary, the perfect fruit has no respect for borders, and winemakers will find the sites that produce the best Washington—and Oregon—wines.

When it comes to “borderline” wines that were made with grapes from both Washington and Oregon, what constitutes a Washington wine versus an Oregon wine? Visit seattlemag.com for answers.

Shannon's Wine Picks



2007 Lost River Winery Syrah (\$24)

Plums and earth dominate this dark Walla Walla Valley Syrah. On the palate there is more plumminess, with notes of black licorice and blackberry. It has a luscious and velvety mouthfeel with round tannins and good mouthwatering acidity. Not too high in alcohol (13.8 percent), this wine has balance and warmth without being hot. Pairs with: Grilled lamb chops with grilled portobello mushrooms.

2007 Pepper Bridge Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55)

Half of this Cabernet Sauvignon comes from the estate Pepper Bridge Vineyard, south of Walla Walla, and the other half is from the Seven Hills Vineyard, across the border in Oregon. There's also a bit of Merlot (10 percent), Cabernet Franc (5 percent), Malbec (1 percent) and Petit Verdot (1 percent), to make this Bordeaux-style blend sing. This is a classic Washington (Oregon!) Cabernet, with mouthwatering acidity to balance the big ripeness of the fruit. Intense blackberry, cassis and leathery notes are softened by silky tannins and a long, lush finish. Pairs with: Braised beef short ribs in caramelized onion wine sauce.

2008 Memaloose Idiot's Grace Cabernet Franc (\$25)

The Cabernet Franc fruit (89 percent) for this brightly flavored wine comes from Idiot's Grace Vineyard in Mosier, Oregon, and Parker's Vineyard, in Lyle, Washington, and is fermented together. A bit of Sangiovese (10 percent) and Cabernet Sauvignon (4 percent) from Parker's Vineyard is added for acidity and structure. Organically grown, the wine is full of red fruit flavors such as raspberry and plum, with earthy and anise aromas. Pairs with: Pork-stuffed cabbage.

2008 Memaloose Trevitt's White (\$17)

Brian McCormick calls this wine a “trans-Gorge affair,” with upriver Viognier (56 percent) from McKinley Springs in the Horse Heaven Hills and upslope Chardonnay (44 percent) from White Salmon Vineyards on Underwood Mountain on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge AVA. Fresh peach and pear and great acidity showcase the ripe fruit of the Horse Heaven Hills against the fresh, cooler-climate Chardonnay. Pairs with: Poached Columbia River sturgeon with shaved fennel.