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Wine Adviser

Despite '04 deep freeze, wines show great fortitude

By Paul Gregutt

Special to The Seattle Times

Three years ago, a killer freeze dropped temperatures into the minus teens in parts of Eastern Washington. Hardest hit were the vineyards in Walla Walla, where almost everyone lost all or most of their 2004 crop.

Freeze years are nothing new in Washington, but this one was particularly ill-timed. The last bad freeze to hit the region was in 1996. The majority of the wineries in Walla Walla were begun after that year and had never been through a hard winter. Many new vineyards had just gone into the ground and were particularly vulnerable. Even the older, more established vineyards, such as Pepper Bridge and Seven Hills, were severely impacted. We are now seeing the fallout from that freeze, as many wineries are releasing their red wines from 2004. The results are a testimony to the resilience of the vineyards, the creativity of the winemakers and the generosity that characterizes the industry statewide.

It is commonplace for Washington wineries to purchase grapes from growers scattered throughout the state. The strategy is a smart one, because some places will ripen grapes best in warm years, others in cool years. In a freeze year, wineries that could call upon growers in other parts of the state were able to make good wines even if their own vineyards were out of production.

The state's biggest wine company, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, quietly and quite generously offered grapes from many of their best vineyards to many boutique wineries, saving them from financial hardship.

A few Walla Walla winemaker/growers, notably Cayuse's Christophe Baron and the late Devin Derby of Spring Valley Vineyards, had been burying shoots in the fall. This expensive, labor-intensive practice is a kind of insurance, and in 2004 it allowed them to bring in crops that were reasonably close to normal.

Spring Valley's 2004 wines — Uriah Red, Nina Lee Syrah, Muleskinner Merlot and Derby Cabernet — are all estate grown and among the best wines they have ever made. Likewise the Cayuse 2004s that I have tasted to date — Cailloux Viognier, En Cerise Syrah and Bionic Frog Syrah — are all exceptional wines and consistent with past vintages.



JEFF HORNER / WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN, 2004

Justin Wylie of Va Piano Vineyards near Walla Walla lost his whole crop to the cold weather in 2004 (a "blessing in disguise," he said, because it gave the young vines a full year to rest). Wylie used grapes from other vineyards to produce some good wines, including the 2004 Va Piano Cabernet Sauvignon.

But what about the wineries that were forced to scramble and make wines from unfamiliar vineyard sources? Here's a quick rundown.

Pick of the week

Syncline 2005 Subduction Red (\$18): Winemaker James Mantone tweaks the blend with each new vintage. Here it includes syrah, grenache, mourvèdre and cinsault. Bright, forward and loaded with juicy and dense fruit, it follows with hints of spice and mineral. A Washington take on Cotes du Rhone — a wine you want to glug. (Distributed by Triage.)

Amavi Cellars, which ordinarily produces 100 percent estate wine, eked out 193 cases of their "Les Collines" syrah and 100 cases of "Seven Hills" syrah in 2004 (both \$32). The Les Collines is a fascinating wine, meaty, herbal and European in style. But the winery's mainline releases — the 2004 Cabernet (\$24) and 2004 Syrah (\$28) — both from Columbia Valley vineyards, are also solidly made, balanced and structured. They may not exactly resemble previous efforts, but they have been given the same first-class treatment.

At **Basel Cellars**, winemaker Trey Busch found excellent fill-in sources in the Yakima Valley and Horse Heaven Hills. His 2004 Columbia Valley Claret (\$20), bottled in screwcap, has substantial fruit, floral aromatics and plenty of tart acids. The 2004 Basel Cellars Merlot (\$24) is smoothing out nicely, but the 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$32), pure cab from Cold Creek vineyard, is even better; a firm, solid, muscular wine.

I noticed more dramatic changes in the '04s from **Beresan**, one of my favorite Walla Walla boutiques. Grower Tom Waliser and winemaker Thomas Glase made good wines, but there was no way to duplicate the distinctive and mineral-rich flavors of wines such as their Stone River Red with grapes from completely different sources. Among all their current releases, Beresan's 2004 Syrah (\$29) showed the most power, with spicy, peppery black-cherry fruit.

Bob and Roger Gamache, whose **Columbia Basin vineyards** sell most of their fruit to Ste. Michelle, began releasing wines under their own label with a 2002 cabernet. The freeze in '04 "dinged the crop," says Bob Gamache. "It thinned it out a little bit. But it was not as bad as '96," he adds, "when we lost half our production back to the ground." Current Gamache releases, all made by Charlie Hoppes, include their first merlot (\$22), a 2004 from estate vines. The other '04's, an estate cabernet and the eagerly awaited GV Reserve, will be released later this spring.

Some of Walla Walla's newest wineries made their first commercial wines in 2004 — a tough start for anybody. **Gifford Hirlinger's** 2004 red, the aptly named **18° Below Red**, was sourced from Canoe Ridge vineyard. A juicy mix of purple and blue fruits, accented with spicy notes of licorice and vanilla bean, it makes a lively palate impression. Another newbie, **Couvillion**, did very well with its 2004 Merlot (\$15) and 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25). Grapes were sourced from Canoe Ridge and Dionysus. **Otis Kenyon's** 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$28), from Panorama vineyards, is one of the few Walla Walla Valley wines made in 2004. Just 80 cases were produced.

Isenhower's 2004 River Beauty Syrah (\$32) and 2004 Wild Thyme (\$17), both Columbia Valley wines, are every bit as good as previous efforts, partly because winemaker Brett Isenhower likes to experiment with new vineyard sources on a regular basis. The Wild Thyme, a delicious Bordeaux blend, is dark and roasted, with scents suggesting syrah although it is mostly merlot and cabernet sauvignon.

Pepper Bridge lost almost all of its 2004 crop, and the 2004 Merlot (\$45) had to be crafted from completely different grape sources. "Chateau Ste. Michelle was very kind to offer some grapes," winemaker Jean-Francois Pellet explains. "Still," he adds, "it was a tricky deal, a one-year effort." The winery's 2003 Merlot was a gorgeous wine, their best ever. Pellet did a very professional job

following up with fruit from widely scattered sources and managed his barrel regimen in such a way as to keep the wine in a style remarkably consistent with past efforts.

Chuck Reininger's Helix label produced a young, pretty sangiovese from Stillwater Creek vines in 2004 (\$27), as well as a thoroughly delicious 2004 Syrah (\$22) that is one of the state's best values. No Reininger label '04s have been released yet.

Justin Wylie was nurturing a new vineyard, planted in 2000, at his **Va Piano winery** adjacent to Pepper Bridge. He lost his whole crop in 2004, but calls it a "blessing in disguise" as the vines had a full year to rest. Wylie had already contracted for other grapes as insurance and put them to good use. His 2004 Va Piano Cabernet Sauvignon (\$38) from Lewis and Cold Creek vineyard fruit, is a fresh, clean wine with sappy berry flavors accented with toasted coconut and mocha.

Although a year such as 2004 can make it difficult for winemakers (and wine writers) to connect the dots to previous vintages, it does offer some valuable lessons.

- Help your neighbor. Next year you might need help.
- Be prepared. Bury canes or contract fruit from different sites.
- Make the best wine you can, but let people know what has changed that might impact your house style.
- Look at the bright side. The year following a freeze is often very good. 2005, based on the many barrel samples I've tasted, may truly be Washington's best vintage ever.

Finding the wines

Unless noted, all Wine Adviser recommendations are currently available, though vintages may sometimes differ. All wine shops and most groceries have a wine specialist on staff. Show them this column, and if they do not have the wine in stock, they can order it for you from the local distributor.

Paul Gregutt's column appears weekly in the Wine section. He can be reached by e-mail at wine@seattletimes.com

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