

# A good thing going on the west coast

Pacific Northwest worth paying attention to

**I**t is exciting for a wine lover when an emerging region starts to come into its own. There's a newish section in the LCBO these days called "Pacific Northwest," and while the three areas represented – British Columbia and the states of Washington and Oregon – might not seem "new or emerging," they seem to have better luck when lumped together.

A lot of people are talking about this region and we should be paying attention.

## Oregon

Situated between California and Washington State, Oregon is known mainly for Pinot Noir, but seems to have found a happy medium combining the fruit forwardness of California with the Burgundian balance of acidity and earthiness.

The first planting of these grapes was in the late 1960s, and since then Oregon has exploded with winery growth: from a mere five in 1970 to more than 600 today.

The key varieties are Pinot Noir and, in a surprising twist, Pinot Gris. This is, in fact, the only region in the world where Pinot Gris is the second-most planted.

While you'll also find Riesling and Gewurztraminer being made, many feel Chardonnay is the real up-and-comer for the years ahead. What makes Oregon such



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a great place for grapes is its precipitation falls mainly during the winter, leaving the growing season fairly dry.

Key regions to know: Willamette Valley (home to more than 400 wineries), Dundee Hills (with its unique red volcanic soil) and Rogue Valley (the most southerly region growing more than 40 varieties).

"Oregon is a relatively new wine-producing region that doesn't have centuries of deep-rooted tradition and rules," says Bryan Lang of Hazelfern Cellars. "As a winemaker, this allows me the flexibility to be innovative and think outside the box when crafting our wines."

## Washington State

This state's winemaking history dates back a little further than Oregon – to the 1860s. However, the industry didn't fully get off the ground until the 1970s. This is due not only to a lack of sufficient water and irrigation techniques in this semi-arid part of the United States, but also to Prohibition's negative impact on wine producing in the





country as a whole.

Today, it is the second-largest producer of quality wines in the U.S., next to California. The keys to Washington's success have been Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. However, these days it's Syrah that is making the biggest impact as the wine world recognizes the beauty and elegance of cool-climate versions of the grape.

What makes Washington so special are the Olympic and Cascade mountain ranges, which act as a barrier to rain and winds coming off the Pacific. Also, while most of the world has to deal with the vine-damaging louse phylloxera, Washington has been left mostly unscathed by the pest.

Key regions to know: the Columbia Valley (the largest region in the state, containing 13 sub-appellations within its boundaries), Walla Walla Valley (home to some of the oldest wineries), Yakima Valley (largest of the Columbia Valley sub-apps, containing three of its own), and Horse Heaven Hills (warmest sub-app with elevations from 90 to 550 metres).

"We're currently approaching 1,000 wineries with more than 55,000 acres of vineyard," says Steve Warner, president of Washington State Wine. "Sales of Washington State wine have nearly doubled from \$1.07 billion in 2009 to more than \$2 billion in 2017. In fact, Washington State wine is poised to pass Washington State apples in the next few years to become the No. 1 agricultural product in the state."

#### British Columbia

B.C.'s Okanagan Valley has been known to Canadians wine lovers for decades, but now the rest of the world is slowly taking notice of the outstanding quality that can be found in one of the world's most northerly winemaking regions. New regions around the province are also being discovered and planted.

The Okanagan Valley is home to more than 60 grape varieties and all seem to flourish there. The big three Bordeaux varietals are king in this "hot" desert-like

climate, especially in the southern desert. Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Chardonnay also add to B.C.'s success.

Key regions to know: Okanagan Valley (160 kilometres in length, first planted in 1859), the Golden Mile Bench (the first Okanagan sub-app, given that distinction in 2014) and the Similkameen Valley (a growing appellations home to about 15 wineries to date).

"We have a very short, hot growing season that is unique to B.C.," says Miles Prodan, president of the B.C. Wine Institute.

"There isn't anything else like it in the world."

I'm sure each region would say the same thing – and after trying the wines from each place they might all be right.

#### WINES WORTH A TRY

**Osoyoos Larose 2014 Le Grand Vin** (British Columbia), \$47.95 (#626325)

A Merlot-dominant blend, 68 per cent, with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot making up the remainder. Nice balance of fruit to secondary flavours such as mocha, cassis, blackberry, vanilla and grippy tannins that will help age the wine gracefully for the next 10-plus years.

**Chateau Ste. Michelle 2016 Chardonnay** (Washington), \$21.95 (#232439)

Not the ballsy, over-oaked versions you find further down the coast in California, here there's a mellon-apple note with lemon on the finish that helps to keep the freshness factor intact.

**Kings Ridge 2015 Pinot Noir** (Oregon), \$27.95 (#237776)

Oregon is primarily known for Pinot Noir. Winemakers seem to have bridged the gap between the earthiness of Burgundy and the over-the-top fruitiness of California, creating a style all their own: here anise and smoke blend with black cherry leading to a satisfying finish. 🍷

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