



A TASTE OF WASHINGTON

PUT A NEW TWIST ON A WINE TASTING WITH TWO TIGHTLY FOCUSED WASHINGTON WINE THEMES
BY JAKE KOSSEFF

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about wine is that the more you know about it, the more enjoyable it is to drink. This is as true of Washington wines as it is of wines from any other region. The intellectual joy of recognizing a grape, or a place, or even just a familiar smell or flavor in your glass can be as pleasurable as the hedonistic joy that comes from simply drinking something tasty. A fun way to learn more about Washington wines is to take part in or, better yet, organize a wine tasting that highlights the nuances of Washington state.

As a sommelier and wine director for Seattle restaurants Cascadia and Campagne, and in my new role as a consultant for restaurants Yarrow Bay Grill, Crush, Qube and others, I have taken part in and organized more than a few Washington wine tastings. Though there are a lot of little details that make one wine tasting more enjoyable than the next, there is one thing that separates great wine tastings from merely average ones: a good theme.

A theme is helpful because there are a multitude of different flavors, aromas, colors and textures in every wine. All of these differences make it overwhelming to taste and learn something from wines that have little or no relationship with one another. A good theme gives the flavors context and makes it easier to understand what the differences and similarities in each wine mean. Variables such as the type of grape (grape variety), where the grapes were grown (place), who made the wine (producer) and what year the grapes were grown (the vintage) all affect the way a wine tastes, smells and looks. A good theme eliminates as many variables as possible, so that it is easier to identify the effects of the variables that remain.

A good theme can be as simple as tasting examples of a single grape variety from different regions, or tasting a number of different grape varieties from the same producer. The possibilities are endless, and almost as much fun to come up with as they are to participate in. For our two tasting-theme examples, I have chosen a selection of Syrahs (same grape variety) from different Washington wine regions and different producers; and a selection of different grape varieties from the same producer and winemaker (Rob Chowanietz at Zefina, in this case) and the same vineyard. All of these wines are available at better retail shops in Washington or through the wineries, so you can duplicate the tastings if you'd like.

To avoid influencing you, I haven't provided tasting notes on these wines. If you'd like to compare my notes to your notes, you can find them online at seattlemag.com/jakeswinetasting08.



Jake Kosseff and *Seattle* magazine wine columnist Shannon Borg prep for their tasting held at Taste Restaurant



Taste through one varietal, like Syrah, to get a flavor for different winemaking styles in our state

THEME #1:

Same Grape, Different Regions, Different Producers

Tasting Syrah from five different Washington wine regions will help you get a clearer picture of both the way that Washington Syrah tastes and the differences between the various wine regions in Washington.

RECOMMENDED WINES TO SERVE:

Wineglass Cellars 2005 Les Vignes De Marcoux Syrah, Yakima Valley, Washington \$35

McCrea Cellars 2004 Ciel du Cheval Vineyard Syrah, Red Mountain, Washington \$43

Syncline 2006 McKinley Springs Vineyard Syrah, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$30

Amavi Cellars 2006 Syrah, Walla Walla Valley, Washington \$28

K Vintners 2006 "The Deal" Sundance Vineyard Syrah, Wahluke Slope, Washington \$35

THEME #2:

Same Vineyard, Same Producer, Different Grapes

Tasting five wines from Zefina's Alder Ridge Vineyard in Horse Heaven Hills that are made from different grapes will help you understand how each grape has its own distinct taste. It also highlights what makes wines from Alder Ridge Vineyard—an undeniably great vineyard that is known for Rhône varieties such as Viognier, Marsanne and Grenache—so special. Another benefit to this tasting is that these wines were all made by Rob Chowanietz, Zefina's winemaker and a graduate of the University of California–Davis, who previously made wine at Canoe Ridge Winery (under John Abbott) and Woodward Canyon Winery.

RECOMMENDED WINES TO SERVE:

Zefina 2006 Alder Ridge Vineyard Serience White (Viognier/Roussanne), Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$19.99

Zefina 2004 Alder Ridge Vineyard Sangiovese, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$19.99

Zefina 2003 Alder Ridge Vineyard Zinfandel, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$19.99

Zefina 2004 Alder Ridge Vineyard Serience Red (Grenache, Mourvèdre, Syrah, Cinsault, Counoise), Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$19.99

Zefina 2005 Alder Ridge Vineyard Tempranillo, Horse Heaven Hills, Washington \$24.99

A WINE-TASTING REFRESHER

THE BASICS OF SIPPING SIMPLIFIED

Though the theme determines the ultimate success of any wine tasting, the details are important as well. Here are my recommendations on some of the most important details:

WINE GLASSES: The most important thing is that the wine glasses are clean and aroma-free. I run the glasses through the dishwasher with no soap, then dry them with a lint-free cloth. The second most important thing is that all of the wine glasses are the same size and shape. Though this seems simple, consider the math: A wine tasting for five people that includes six wines requires 30 glasses. Short of identical glassware for everyone, each person should have a set of matching wine glasses, even if their glasses don't match everyone else's. This way, each person's wine glasses affect all of the wines they taste in the same way.

HOW MANY WINES TO SERVE? This depends on how serious you are, or would like to be at your tasting. A tasting of five wines can be very

enlightening if they are well-chosen. A tasting of 10 wines provides a lot of variety, and looks very exciting on paper. A tasting with more than 10 wines causes most people lose track of which is which, although professional tastings often include as many as 100 wines.

HOW MUCH WINE TO POUR IN EACH GLASS? This depends on the size of the glass and how many wines are being served. The glasses should be about one-quarter full so that there is enough room for the aromas of the wine to collect. Two to 3 ounces per person is a good amount (about a quarter of a standard wine glass, but less in a large Riedel glass), and provides plenty to taste, though in tastings that include a large number of wines, or very expensive wines, 1 ounce of each per person is adequate. There are 25.35 ounces in a standard (750 ml) bottle.

BLIND TASTING OR NOT? Blind tasting simply means tasting the wines without knowing what they are. It allows the taster to assess the wine absent of any preconceived notions. It's not necessary to do a blind tasting, but if you do, remember to come up with a system to keep track of which wine is which, so that when you unveil the wines you will know which wines you tasted.

WHAT TO PAY ATTENTION TO: Remember that tasting wine is as much about seeing, smelling and feeling as it is about tasting. Start by taking a good look at the wine: What color is it? What do the tears on the sides of the glass look like? Then smell the wine: Do you smell fruit? Do you smell flowers, herbs or spices? Do you smell earth? What else? Finally, when you put the wine in your mouth, don't just think about the flavors, but think about the texture, the balance and the length of time the flavors remain with you. Take notes on your observations and don't worry about being right, just be honest: Soon you will develop your own vocabulary. *J.K.*

Tasting wines from the same producer and vineyard but made with different grapes showcases each grape's—and the vineyard's—distinct flavor



visit seattlemag.com/jakeswinetasting08 for Jake's tasting notes