THE WINE GUY

Walla Walla Valley winemakers have attained wow facto

RICH MAURO
Gazette wine columnist

If you attended last month's Colorado Springs Wine Festival, you were treated to a great introduction to one of the wine world's rising-star regions: the Walla Walla Valley in southeastern Washington state.

The festival featured fine wines from several of the area's best wineries: Abeja, Bergevin Lane, Long Shadows, Northstar, Pepper Bridge and Waters.

Here's hoping the festival whet your appetite to explore the region further, because the valley is home to more than 60 wineries.

There is no better place to start than Leonetti Cellar, Washington's ultimate cult wine. I think it is fair to say that without Leonetti owner Gary Figgins (and his friend Rick Small of Woodward Canyon), Walla Walla wine country wouldn't be what it is today.

Figgins' family owned a farm east of the town of Walla Walla, where they were into home winemaking. When they made the leap to commercial production in 1978 (naming the winery after his maternal grandparents), there were no wineries in the area. Before long, his powerful, concentrated, yet graceful wines began to win international praise.

A few years ago, Gary's son assumed most of the daily winemaking responsibilities. The quality of the wines (which now are a father/son collaboration) remains as high as ever, as was demonstrated by the nearly universal accolades for the most recent vintages.

The only problem is that Leonetti makes about 6,000 cases a year. The wines are tightly allocated to select restaurants and wine shops, and there is about a two-year wait to get on the mailing list.

But trust me, I had a chance recently to taste the 2002 Walla Walla Reserve (a cabernet sauvignon, merlot, petite verdot blend, $100), 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Walla Walla ($70), 2003 Merlot Columbia Valley ($60) and 2003 Sangiovese Walla Walla ($50) and they are worth both the lofty prices and the effort it takes to find them. The distributor tells me you can get them at The Broadmoor, as well as at Table 6, Sketch, Ruth's Chris Steak House and Elway's in Denver.

Ironically, most Walla Walla producers have sourced most of their grapes over the years from the Columbia Valley to the west.

Although these wineries and most others in Walla Walla have increased plantings, the Columbia Valley is still Washington's premier grape-growing region. So I recommend you expand your exploration of Washington wines to include the Columbia Valley.

If anyone knows the prime vineyards of the Columbia Valley, it is Charlie Hoppes. During his 20-year career, he has done stints at several wineries and started Cañon de Sol with a friend.

In 2000, Hoppes released the first wines under his own label, Fidelitas, and now produces about 5,000 cases. He has used his knowledge of the region and relationships developed over the years to access fruit from some of the top vineyards in the state, including Champoux, Wahluke and Conner-Lee in the Columbia Valley, Klipsun from the well-regarded Red Mountain subappellation, and Bouchey in the Yakima Valley.

A sample of the current releases substantiated the quality available from such superior sites. The 2004 Semillon ($18) was a treat for its juicy melon and citrus aromas and flavors and its full body (for a white wine). The 2003 Merlot ($25) was notable for its sleek texture and balance of juicy black fruit and cocoa finished with smooth tannins. The 2002 Syrah ($35) was deep, full-flavored, thick-textured and spicy, and a good example of why Washington is becoming popular territory for syrah. Finally, the 2002 Meritage "Optu" ($35) was a fine blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and malbec — complex, concentrated and worthy of some time in the cellar.

Hoppes also makes cabernet sauvignons from Columbia Valley ($30), Walla Walla ($44) and Champoux ($55), and a chardonnay from the Elerding Vineyard ($28) in the Yakima Valley.

Fidelitas wines will become available throughout Colorado beginning next month, and there should be fairly wide distribution.

These recent tastings of wines from Leonetti, Fidelitas and the vintners represented at the Colorado Springs Wine Festival were just the most recent confirmation
Walla Walla and
Valley are world-
gions that deserv
tion from consum

They are doi
and making gre
we should do ours

Reach Rich Mauro
write to him at Th
Box 1779, Colorado