

RESTAURANT WINE



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2005 Winery of the Year:



Bob Bertheau, Winemaker

CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE

Where Quality & Value Compete For Center Stage

Chateau Ste. Michelle may be the second largest winery in Washington, but it is producing some of its very best wines-and most remarkable values.

Woodinville—Few wineries during the past couple of decades have delivered such consistently good wines at reasonable prices as Chateau Ste. Michelle (we have followed them since 1978). Yes, there have been patches where some of the wines have not been as good as expected, vintage conditions notwithstanding, but there is no winery in the world with which we are familiar, and whose wines we have followed for 25+ years, where the same statement also could be made, and, for us, hold true.

The good news is that Chateau Ste. Michelle continues to fine-tune and generally improve its wines, whether at the Columbia Valley varietal or single vineyard level, where its wines are often among the best values in their respective price categories, year after year. And, at the high end, in their Reserve and joint venture bottlings, wine quality is improving at an accelerated pace.

For a winery of its size, its accomplishments are substantial. Chateau Ste. Michelle is not only the second largest producer of wine in Washington State (after its sister winery, Columbia Crest, both owned by Ste. Michelle Wine Estates), but also makes some of its best wines and top values. We are pleased to name it the RESTAURANT WINE Winery of the Year - 2005.

Where Quality Originates

Chateau Ste. Michelle, to many, is the Washington wine industry. The company owns 3,500 acres of vineyards, and purchases from 200 growers. Indeed, the three wineries owned by the mother company, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates (Columbia Crest, Snoqualmie, and Chateau Ste. Michelle), together crush nearly half of the state's fruit, and make a little less than half its wine (just under 3.5 million cases, out of 7 million cases).

Chateau Ste. Michelle is a very large winery, which shipped 1.2 million cases in 2004, and will likely ship 1.3 million in 2005. It expects to sell nearly 500,000 cases of Riesling this year, and is the world's largest single-company producer of this varietal (i.e., not a cooperative producer or negociant). Yet, from Riesling to Cabernet Sauvignons (and blends), its wines are remarkably good.

The question is: how can a company of this size make such good wines across its product spectrum, and actually seem to be improving them from year to year? We suggest the following two broad "answers":

- 1. It is a committed, well-run company that truly strives to deliver high quality/top value wines.** Moreover, it has invested significantly during its history to do so, in terms of vineyard ownership, grape sourcing, viticultural and winemaking research (both its own and through projects it has helped fund, then shared the results with the Washington wine industry), winemaking and winery investments (facilities, equipment, barrels, personnel), and joint venture projects (namely, its Eroica/Single Berry Select Riesling project with renowned German vintner, Ernst Loosen; and its Col Solare proprietary red wine project with the celebrated Italian vintner, Piero Antinori).
- 2. Washington state wine grapes are improving in quality at a rapid pace.** Washington State, like other premium wine growing areas throughout the world, is a region in transition. But in eastern Washington, where 99% of its wine grapes are grown, the mentality of many growers (who also farm several other crops, such as apples and hops) has shifted from one of grape growing—where grapes are measured by appearance and by the ton—to one of wine growing—where grapes are measured by the quality of the wine they produce. Chateau Ste. Michelle, with its team of viticulturalists who advise and meet regularly with growers, has been a driving force in this transition.

And according to Chateau Ste. Michelle's Director of Viticulture, Kevin Corliss, those quality improvements are in their early stages, meaning that grape quality is likely to improve significantly in the years ahead. Corliss, incidentally has been with CSM since 1983.

He cites the following recent advances in Washington viticulture as key to grape quality improvements:

- a growing "regional awareness" as to which varieties do best in which vineyard sites ("Cabernet Sauvignon is being planted in warmer sites, like the Wahluke Slope, and Riesling in the coolest parts of the Yakima Valley", he says);



Chateau Ste. Michelle Timeline

- 1934** National Wine Company (NAWICO) founded, parent company of what would later become Chateau Ste. Michelle.
- 1951** NAWICO plants Grenache in the Columbia Valley, and releases the wine in cork-finished bottles in 1954.
- 1954** NAWICO merges with Pommerelle to become American Wine Growers (AWG).
- 1965** AWG plants first Riesling in Yakima Valley.
- 1966** Author Leon Adams, impressed by a Washington Grenache, encourages the commercial production of vinifera-based wines.
- 1967** Andre Tchelistcheff becomes consultant to AWG. AWG launches Ste. Michelle label for vinifera-based wines produced from eastern Washington grapes.
- 1972/3** Cold Creek Vineyard planted.
- 1975** Company harvests first Chardonnay grapes
- 1976** Name changed from Ste. Michelle Vintners to Chateau Ste. Michelle (CSM). Harvests first Merlot grapes.
- 1978** First Cold Creek Cabernet made; first CSM ice wine (Riesling) produced.
- 1993** Canoe Ridge Vineyard planted.
- 1994** Canoe Ridge Estate winery opened for harvest.
- 1998** Col Solare joint venture announced between CSM and Piero Antinori.
- 1999** First Col Solare, from 1996 vintage, released. Riesling joint venture project (Eroica, Single Berry Select) with Ernst Loosen announced; first grapes harvested. Expansion of Canoe Ridge facility begun. Ron Bunnell named CSM red winemaker.
- 2000** 1999 Eroica Riesling and 1999 Single Berry Select Riesling released.
- 2002** First CSM Pinot Gris and Syrah produced.
- 2003** Bob Bertheau hired as winemaker of CSM white wines.
- 2004** Bob Bertheau becomes head winemaker; Ron Bunnell becomes Col Solare winemaker.
- 2005** RESTAURANT WINE® Winery of the Year



Chateau Ste. Michelle



Ernst Loosen and Bob Bertheau work together on Eroica (below)



- the wide diversity of clones being planted in vineyards (“Some years ago, we were very mono-clonal here, and tended to plant vineyards with just one or two clones of a variety. Now there has been a push for more clones in the vineyard, not only to determine which ones are best, but also to provide winemakers with more blending options,” Corliss says.);
- better understanding of the vine’s water needs, by grape variety (“We normally get only 6 to 8 inches of rain all year, so water management in the vineyard is an important tool. But rather than irrigating the same on all varieties, we have begun managing it by variety and by site. Riesling, for example, needs more water than Cabernet Sauvignon, which does better with some water stress. But the same level in Riesling gives it undesirable characteristics.”)

Corliss also suggests that greater vine density per acre (“Row spacing for new vineyards is 7 to 8 feet, down from 9 to 10, and distance between vines is now 3 to 6 feet, not 5 to 7”) and better canopy management (“We now understand that some varieties, like Cabernet, need more cluster exposure than others to develop flavors; others, like Riesling, do better with less”) are having a positive impact on the quality of flavors and styles of contemporary Washington wines. But he also suggests that much of the viticultural research and trials that are in progress today will not even find their way into bottles of Washington wine for years. “It’s a long-term pay-off.”

In The Winery

Bob Bertheau, CSM’s winemaker (originally hired as its white winemaker in 2003, but promoted to head winemaker in 2004) agrees that Washington fruit is getting better, and that in the winery efforts are being made to maximize wine quality.

He says that since he has come aboard, there has been a renewed effort to separate fermented wines early, according to which product tier they will be directed, a practice that streamlines efficiency, reduces costs, and—if done properly—leads to better wine.

“In our white wines, we are looking for lower phenolics, fresher fruit, and lower levels of oak [than before]”, he says, “and, in our reds, we are seeking riper flavors, good mouthfeel, and complexity.” Although the use of new oak is down somewhat, more French-coopered American oak is being used on a relative scale.

Ron Bonnell, former head winemaker and now winemaker for Col Solare, the Antinori-CSM joint venture, says that tannin management in CSM red wines has moved from being “over-extracted—trying to get everything the grapes would give us” (which led to overly tannic wines) to being a “managed extraction”, involving more cold soaking of fruit, more punch downs, and using less press wines (resulting in suppler, fruitier, better balanced wines).

One other factor that will play an increasing role in defining the styles, and improving the quality of CSM wines in coming years, is blending. Blending, when applied to single varietal wines—for example, across a spectrum of sites, and at different ripeness levels and/or from different sites—or to blends (such as Col Solare, which is based upon Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah), can turn otherwise interesting wines into exceptional ones, as in the unreleased 2002 Col Solare.

What Chateau Ste. Michelle Produces:

Columbia Valley Wines

Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Semillon, Gewurztraminer

Cabernet Sauvignon

Merlot, Syrah

Single Vineyard Wines

Cold Creek Vineyard: Chardonnay, Riesling; **Horse Heaven Vineyard:** Sauvignon Blanc; **Canoe Ridge Estate Vineyard:** Chardonnay; **Indian Wells:** Chardonnay; **Cold Creek Vineyard:** Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon; **Canoe Ridge Estate Vineyard:** Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon; **Indian Wells:** Merlot

Reserve Wines

Chardonnay (becomes "Ethos", with the 2003 vintage), Late Harvest Riesling

Merlot

Cabernet Sauvignon (becomes "Ethos", with the 2003 vintage), Syrah, Artist Series Meritage

Joint Venture Wines

Eroica, Col Solare

Chateau Ste. Michelle's Single Vineyard Wines

Canoe Ridge Estate - 10 miles west of Paterson, above the Columbia River; site of the winery's red winemaking facility, which houses 36,000 barrels, and in any given vintage, approximately 450 separate lots of wine; planted first in 1991; now consists of 466 acres of vineyards, primarily Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot; a warm site, on steep slopes, cooled by winds routinely blowing through the Columbia Gorge, it yields fine wines, which are usually slightly lighter in body yet crisper than those from other designated vineyards

Horse Heaven Vineyard - 450 acre vineyard on gentle slopes in Paterson, first planted in the early 1980s, now home mostly to Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon; it yields slightly fuller wines than Canoe Ridge, and is slightly warmer

Cold Creek Vineyard - a 660 acre vineyard, first planted in 1970, situated 38 miles east of Yakima; planted on gentle slopes, primarily to Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, Chardonnay, and Merlot; a warm site, yielding richly flavored wines (red and white), often of outstanding quality

Indian Wells Vineyard - a 367 acre vineyard on a gentle west-facing slope on the warm Wahluke Slope, planted in 1984, mostly to Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chardonnay; the warmest of these vineyards, its wines are full and generous in flavor are purchased by 300+ wineries. By comparison, in 1991 there were 11,100 acres of wine grapes and 83 wineries.

Chateau St. Michelle Wines Recently Reviewed in RESTAURANT WINE®		
Wine	Rating	Issue
2002 Chardonnay	★★★★	#100
2001 Merlot	★★★★+	#100
2001 Cabernet Sauvignon	★★★★	#100
2003 Pinot Gris	★★★★+	#101
2001 Cabernet Cold Creek	★★★★+	#101
2000 Cabernet Reserve	★★★★+	#101
2003 Riesling	★★★★	#102
2002 Chardonnay Reserve	★★★★★	#104
2002 Merlot Canoe Ridge	★★★★	#104
2001 Cabernet Reserve	★★★★+	#104
2002 Merlot Cold Creek	★★★★	#104
2001 Col Solare	★★★★★	#104

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RONN WIEGAND, the first person in the world to hold both the Master of Wine & Master Sommelier titles, had the distinction of passing both exams on his first attempt and receiving exclusive awards (Tim Derouet, Krug Cup) for top scores in each.

He is an active wine consultant and wine marketing specialist, who has worked in restaurants and hotels in the U.S. and Europe in many capacities (dish-washer, busser, server, banquet waiter, captain, maitre d'hotel, room service captain, sommelier, restaurant assistant manager). Mr. Wiegand regularly conducts trade workshops and private consultation on the theme, "Maximizing Your Wine Program", in cities throughout North America.

From 1986-1991, Wiegand was wine columnist for The San Francisco Examiner and, from 1994-1999 penned the wine column for Nation's Restaurant News (New York). In mid-1996, Wiegand also launched TasteTour® Publications & Seminars, which publishes TasteTour WineGuides and TasteTour® WineCharts, concise, artistic, practical "short courses" on the world's major varietal wines. They are used for training in hundreds of restaurants, wineries, and wine distributorships throughout North America.

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