

Wine & Spirits

2011 WINERIES OF THE YEAR

CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE



Bob Bertheau

REGIONAL

Founded: 1934

Winemakers: Bob Bertheau, Raymon McKee & Wendy Stuckey

Viticulturist: Kevin Corliss

Acres owned: 3,500

Annual production: 2,000,000 cases

Estate grown: 40%

Owner: Wholly owned subsidiary of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates

Known for: Exceptional value for price, especially in merlot & cabernet.

Location: Woodinville, WA

Website: ste-michelle.com

With all of the economic uncertainty of the past summer and the volatile markets of the fall, it was good to be reminded in 2011 that, in this country, Chateau Ste. Michelle remains one of the wine world's great bastions of quality for price, full stop. Just look at their two highest-scoring wines this year, both appellation wines, a merlot and a cabernet, both well shy of \$20 a bottle, both as satisfying as any wine for the price in American right now.

Certainly two very good vintages, 2007 and 2008, made their contribution. Perhaps the introduction of 14 Hands, a Washington State brand one tier below Ste. Michelle's appellation wines, has helped. But winemaker Bob Bertheau believes that improved viticulture, better triage going into the crusher and the culling of some less than optimal vineyard contracts have contributed to the rising tide. "The bottom line is the fruit of course," he says. "Three or four years ago the bottom ten percent wasn't as stellar as it could have been; but if you take that away, you can make a wine fifty percent better."

I won't vouch for his math, but it's no secret that Ste. Michelle has some of the most extensive vineyard sources in Washington. Bertheau draws most of his fruit from the warm Wahluke Slope and, south of there, the Horse Heaven Hills. Between them there is a range of tone and ripeness that would be the envy of any multisource winery. Thus the flavors of the 2007 Merlot suggest the blend: warm bright red fruit adorned by a Horse Heaven Hills leafiness. The 2008 Cabernet, meanwhile, is richer and more forward, driven by dark berry fruits and completely seductive.

The annual bottling of Eroica, the project Ste. Michelle launched in partnership with Mosel producer Ernst Loosen, was impressive as well, even in the warm 2009 vintage. Pure and bright, with scents of Meyer lemon and crisp apple, it has, in the six months since last tasted, become even more graceful. —P.J.C.



TOP-SCORING WINES

93 '07 Columbia Valley Merlot \$16 (6/11)

93 '08 Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon \$16 (6/11)

92 '09 Columbia Valley Eroica Riesling \$24 (6/11)