

State's top 10 red wines are a cut above the crowd

Randy Buckner, Wine and Spirits

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In my somewhat biased, yet confident opinion, I believe that Washington has the potential to be one of the great red wine regions of the world. As grape varieties are planted in the proper macroclimates, as these wines gain age and as winemakers perfect their skills, the resulting wines will rival any and all challengers.

Washington wine production is still a relatively young industry. Growth has been phenomenal, with wine grape plantings almost tripling in the past nine years. Growers are still experimenting with a range of grape varieties, differing clones and the geographic areas that allow these grapes to thrive and show their varietal characteristics.

Washington merlot has already established itself as world-class wine, with its intense fruit and bright acidity. Cabernet sauvignon is snapping at its heels, with syrah coming on strong.

I dislike overoaked, flabby red wines with harsh, unripe tannins. Washington by no means holds the exclusive production rights for these types of wines; however, that is another story. My quest is to find the wines that break the chains of mediocrity and stand above the crowd. I believe the following list of the top 10 wines do just that and much more.

Nos. 10, 9 and 8 (tie): 2000 Bookwalter, Merlot, Columbia Valley, \$25. Deep ruby red-hued, this wine has a host of aromas ranging from black cherries and blackberries to dark cedar and vanilla. This is a mouthful of merlot. Lovely fruit explodes on the palate, enhanced by an earthy wood note. Delightful. 91/91.

Nos. 7 and 6 (tie): 1999 DeLille, Harrison Hill, Yakima Valley, \$55, 500 cases: Black fruit, leather and wood scents enhance this complex wine. Full-bodied, elegant, displaying silky tannins, the earthy notes, eucalyptus and minerals meld seamlessly with the black fruit. You'll enjoy the rich aftertaste. 91/89.

Nos. 7 and 6 (tie): 1999 Kestrel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Old Vine Estate, Yakima Valley, \$50: Very elegant upfront, the polished tannins sneak up on you, delivering a modest punch on the finish. A rich, complex nose of blackberry, nutmeg,

vanilla and English leather repeats on the palate. This lovely, medium-bodied wine has a nice acidic backbone to tie it all together. 91/89.

No. 5: 2000 L'Ecole, Apogee, Pepper Bridge Vineyard, Walla Walla Valley, \$41, 1,259 cases: This merlot-predominant wine is deeply hued, with aromas of cassis, cherries, raspberries and cedar. Very elegant on the entry, with aromas resounding in the mouth. Tannins are obvious but rounded, and should develop well with bottle age. The very long, fruity after-taste is delightful. 91/90.

Nos. 4, 3, and 2 (tie): 2000 Donedei, Merlot, Columbia Valley, \$34, 140 cases: You'll find lots of lovely black cherry fruit on the nose, with a touch of raspberries and spice. The tastes are complex and fruity, with ripe tannins, brisk acidity and a lengthy aftertaste. Very drinkable right now, the wine will improve for at least five years in the cellar and may go considerably longer. 91/91.

Nos. 4, 3 and 2 (tie): 2001 McCrea, Syrah, Yakima Valley, \$38, 245 cases: This is a mouthful of wine that is approachable now and over the next few years before the 14.8 percent alcohol becomes more apparent. Tannins are silky smooth. Smoked meat, coffee, chocolate, dense black fruit and toasty oak dance across the senses, then lingers on the endless finish. 91/91.

No. 1: 2000 McCrea, Syrah, Cuvee Orleans, Yakima Valley, \$50: McCrea Cellars is red hot. It seems they have the magic touch. Very polished, with respectable acidity, this wine is simply packed with Bing cherry, raspberry, blackberry and sweet oak flavors. The berry aftertaste seems endless. Charming! 92/90.

Dr. Randy "Bucko" Buckner lives in Steilacoom and is a family practitioner in Olympia. He is a professional wine judge and covers new U.S. wine releases for The Wine Lovers' Page on the Internet. Wines are rated on a 100-point scale, with the first number indicating quality and the second rating relative value. You can send him an e-mail at randybuckner@att.net or visit his Web page at www.wineloverspage.com/bucko.