

# Believe it when you see it

Wines from the Pacific Northwest are securing listings. Gary Werner reports how their time has finally come



Walla Walla Valley straddles the border between Washington and Oregon

There really is a groundswell," says Neville Harris, commercial manager for Stratford's Wine Agencies. "Everyone involved acknowledges the Pacific Northwest is something different, and that we can do something with it. We're certainly excited because chances to bring new winegrowing regions to our market don't come around very often."

Harris is talking about wines from the American states of Washington and Oregon. After years of very minor and intermittent placements in Britain, a growing mass of regional brands are suddenly winning significant representation. Stratford's, for example, is launching several wines this spring from Ste Michelle Wine Estates, the largest producer in the Pacific Northwest. Other prominent UK merchants such as Bibendum are securing handfuls of listings, too. Even

supermarkets such as Marks & Spencer are taking serious notice.

But why now? Oregon has been known domestically for its expressions of Pinot Noir across many years; and Washington has long captured America's attention for Merlot, Cabernet and Syrah. But both industries are dominated by small wineries that enjoy high local demand – with prices to match. And that combination has closed the door to UK exports. So what's driving this new interest?

## Favourable conditions

One factor is currency exchange rates: the recent weakness of the dollar relative to the pound has made these wines less expensive abroad. A second factor is generic trade promotion: between 18 months and two years ago, the Oregon and Washington wine industry authorities hired Surrey-based marketing agency Hilltop Wines to facilitate relationships between regional producers and UK importers.

Visible examples of that work have been an impressive (80sq m) stand at last year's London Wine Trade Fair as well as two large January trade and press tastings. (The most recent of those winter events showed nearly 200 wines from more than 40 brands.)

However, the apparent deal-maker for the hundreds of cases that have arrived here since December is direct exposure to the region for British wine business owners and buyers. Attendance at popular, week-long regional trade events such as Oregon Pinot Camp and the Washington Wine Experience seems to make all the difference to winning listings.

Al Portney, vice president for international sales at Ste Michelle Wine Estates, says: "We've had a lot of participation by the trade from countries like Denmark and Germany, and now those markets are doing really well for us. So it's a function of awareness. People just need to see the region for themselves. When they understand what we can offer, sales always



Simon Taylor (left) and Al Portney

follow." He adds: "In the past, we had no one from Britain. Then last year we finally had a few. So watch this space."

Neville from Stratford's was one of those people at the 2007 Washington Wine Experience. "There are various seminars and estate visits over five days. They cover the major growers and some boutiques, too," he says. "We visited about 10 different wineries, and we discussed the various sub-regions. You come away with a good understanding of what they are about, what they have been doing and what they want to do."

And, as Portney says, that understanding leads to sales. Wine in the new range that Stratford's is taking from Ste Michelle Wine Estates arrives in the UK this month before their formal launch at the London Wine Trade Fair in May.

Tim Marson of Bibendum had a similar experience at Oregon Pinot Camp last June. "Their key varieties – Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris – are interesting and quite sexy right now," he says. "But people are always looking for the next exciting wine area. For example, we already have listings from Mexico and Brazil."

"Now I'm not saying Oregon is as exotic as those. The state doesn't suggest much more than pine forests and sea mist, if anything, to people. But it is something new, and what we have found with wines from the A to Z brand are classic examples of the state's wines for consumers to

consider. Fingers crossed, it will work. It will be a slow start, but by year two or three there should be a critical mass."

As further support in that direction, Gerd Stepp, wine buyer for North America at Marks & Spencer, visited Oregon for the first time over three days shortly before Christmas. "We're expanding our American offer," he says, "so we wanted to learn a little more about that state's wine industry. We saw 10 producers while there, plus we had a generic tasting. And it was great. Their regional message is very strong, so I think it can add interest to our list." He adds: "We've selected some Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris for a follow-up tasting because we definitely want to progress with a couple of wines, if not four of them, from this region. Depending on how everything goes, we should have the first of them by September."

## Independent support

The Pacific Northwest seems to have caught the imagination of key independent retailers, too. Noel Young of the eponymous Cambridge wine business visited both Washington and Oregon in early March to get an overview and to seek out some top names. "We need some A-list stuff over here," he says. "It might only be 10 cases of a given brand, but that's enough to create a buzz. Then more of the rest can slot in underneath."

Simon Taylor of Stone, Vine & Sun in Winchester has also visited both states, and it has translated into 10 additions to his list. "We like wines that show terroir, and most of these do exactly that. They're bloody good," he says. "As well, I think for the first time ever, they represent value because of the exchange rate and the way wines from other regions of the world have increased in price." He continues: "It's too early to know what customers think. But I believe in them, and I'll work to sell them through."

It's all a stark contrast to the attitude of the UK trade just a few years ago. But then it seems that seeing really is believing.

## Wines to try on your shelves

### A to Z Pinot Blanc

(£10.75, Bibendum)

### Columbia Crest H3 Merlot

(£10.99, Stratford's)

### Cristom Mount Jefferson Pinot Noir

(£19.95, Playford Ros)

### Domaine Drouhin Laurène Pinot Noir

(£27.95, Berry Bros & Rudd)

### Elk Cove Pinot Gris

(£11.95, Playford Ros)

### Firesteed Pinot Noir

(£13.49, Liberty Wines)

### L'Ecole No41 Semillon

(Contact The Wine Treasury)

### Powers Meritage

(£8.99, World Wine Agencies)

### Seven Hills Merlot

(£16.95, Stone, Vine & Sun)

### Sokol Blosser Dundee Hills Pinot Noir

(£18.50, Les Caves de Pyrene)

### Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot Noir

(Contact The Wine Treasury)