

Washington and Oregon, two very separate states of America, but twinned with a passion to make wines unmatched by anywhere else in the US. But they remain largely unknown to many in the UK hence the reason for putting them up to the test in this month's *Harpers* food and wine pairing hosted by London's Sketch restaurant. *Richard Siddle* reports

THE RISING STATES OF AMERICA

Big wines and big personalities. On paper that does not leave a lot of space to breathe, never mind discuss the merits of Washington and Oregon wines. But in reality they proved a very winning combination at last month's *Harpers* food and wine matching.

Washington and Oregon wines have long been one of the wine trade's little secrets, the kind of wines that canny wine merchants keep aside for customers who are a little above the average or the sommelier looking to offer a discerning diner something slightly different.

Great for those looking to have something unique and special on their list, but not ideal for the marketing teams and producers behind Washington and Oregon wines.

It's not for a want of trying that Washington and Oregon wines are so hard to come by, it's just they have not been able to convince enough UK buyers to take them on in the volumes they want.

The last thing the Washington Wine Commission and Oregon Wine Board want is to remain small, niche and unique in the UK marketplace. They argue there are enough quality wines per square hectare of wine growing in their regions to go up against wines in any other wine growing area in the world.

They are also keen to prove it, which brings us back to the matter in hand – the *Harpers* Washington and Oregon roundtable.

The panelists for this month's event would certainly let

them know where they stood in terms of getting a foothold in the UK. It included three former supermarket buyers; the ex-Somerfield, turned consultant, and multi-million pound palate herself, Angela Mount; the former Waitrose buyer and now larger than life broadcaster, educator and consultant, Joe Wadsack; and the ex-Sainsbury's and former wine director at the Albert Wine Company, Michael Harrison.

They were joined by sommeliers Roger Tozer, of the Butlers Wharf Chop House; Irina Atanasova, of Enoteca Turi; and from the independent world, Kyri Sotiri, of Soho Wines.

Batting for Washington and Oregon was the self-dubbed most travelled man in the wine world, Al Portney, vice president of international sales at St Michelle Wine Estate, the biggest producer in Washington; and Mike Coveney, managing director of Washington and Oregon's UK trade representative, Hilltop Wines.

The hosts for the day, Sketch, nestling just off London's Regent Street, were more than up for the challenge. Denis Le Bras, gallery head chef, and Pascal Sanchez, executive chef, along with Sketch sommelier, Raphael Rodriguez, had put together 12 wonderfully eclectic dishes, combining a whole range of tastes and flavours, to sit alongside 12 Washington and Oregon wines.

Point of difference

Before the wine and food team had a chance to get proceedings under way, the panel was soon into a full



Now we can eat: the panel for the Washington and Oregon tasting gets down to business at Sketch restaurant's private dining room





blown discussion about the merits of Washington and Oregon wines.

Michael Harrison was quickly out of the blocks with a full blown testimonial for both states following a trip there last year. "In my WSET days, Oregon was all Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but what blew me away when I visited was the Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, so I think open your eyes and let them give you this experience. The whites are stunning."

He said the regions allow him to try new ranges and offer customers something new. "They over deliver on entry level wines, and have the right price points, the challenge for Oregon is to get the volumes up for the UK, at those same right price points," said Harrison.

But that is not surprising, said Portney, when you consider Oregon has around 5,000 hectares of grapes under vine compared to 13,000 in Washington. While Oregon's future looks more likely to be secured in the independent and on-trade sectors, there are hopes that Washington wines, which have doubled production in the last 10 years, can move more into the mainstream.

Mount said the interest in the UK wine trade is certainly there – and has been for a good three to four years – but how do you cut through to the public and let them know what great wines there are coming from these two exciting regions?

Portney agreed it was a big challenge. "We have to get sales people, agents, importers to be passionate about our wines," he said. "They have to show that enthusiasm

for us. We have clearly engaged people like Mike and the hope is he will then pass it on and on."

Mount argued that passion has to be taken on to the sales floor, be it in wine merchants or restaurants. It is one thing, she said, to have the wines stocked, it is a whole different battle to then get the sales staff pushing them on to customers.

Atanasova agreed: "For me Oregon is Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. I'm sure there are good examples of other varieties but I have not found them. I think it's important for you to educate sommeliers."

Californian alternative

Rodriguez at Sketch is already an advocate and is particularly keen on Pinot Noir coming out of Oregon. "The cool climate there means it is making some really interesting wines. The Pinot Noirs are Burgundian in style and less alcoholic than California," he said.

"That's a great selling point," stressed Atanasova, of Enoteca Turi. Tozer agreed: "A lot of people are looking for alternatives to California, something a little different to put on your list."

Wadsack was prepared to go even further: "Washington and Oregon's best message is to say it is four times better value than California." The problem they face, however, is that it is just not in "people's field of view" as they are "just looking at bulk, volume from California," he added.

Portney said it was good in one way to be seen as part of the US category, but it was hard to get real awareness as

WASHINGTON AND OREGON TASTING

On January 22, 2009, the Oregon Wine Board and Washington Wine Commission will be hosting a wine tasting at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 12 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1 from 10.30am to 4.30pm. More than 200 wines are expected to be shown, with a combination of wines already with UK distribution and others seeking representation. There will be wines for all sectors of the trade, along with selected representatives from importers and wineries. Two educational seminars will be held as well as two special seminars one for each state. For more information contact Kate Sweet at kate@hilltopwines.co.uk.

Washington and Oregon tasting



people are not aware of where their states are.

New Zealand's success in the UK is seen, said Portney, as very much a guide as to what its potential is. "It has to export to survive. We are similar in size and in New Zealand producers realised they had to go round the world to promote their wines. We have to do the same," he explained.

Mount, however, warned Washington and Oregon would have a much tougher task in that UK consumers have an affinity with New Zealand they simply would not have for two US states.

Wadsack said it was all about targeting the right channel – be it the independents or on-trade – and then really promoting awareness there. "It is about moving New Zealand Pinot Noir drinkers to Oregon, say, Pinot Noir," he said.

In the meantime, it is about getting the wines in front of people. Which is why, said Portney, it has worked so hard to successfully get its wines into the first class and business class areas of major airlines and on to restaurant tables on top cruise lines. "That's when people get the chance to discover our wines," he said.

Time to eat

The food came to postpone the wider debate for a minute. The first dish out of the kitchen was a carpaccio of sea bream, Nori seaweed and avocado with pearls of Soja sauce and Mirin, which was paired with a 2005 Pacific Rim Dry Riesling.

Rodriguez said the challenge here was to find a wine that could stand up to the "meatiness" of the sea bream and the saltiness in the dish, yet handle the mayonnaise. Mount felt the pairing went well and that the wine did not carry too much acidity and coped with the richness that came with the mayonnaise and the pearls of soja which was the dominant flavour coming through. "The Riesling cut through that very nicely, it was a lovely melting pot of flavours," she said.

Portney said he is particularly proud of the Rieslings coming out of the region and the fact Germany is now its third biggest buyer for its Rieslings, which he likened to trying to get "eskimos to buy ice".

The second course paired a tarragon consommé with torrefied pine nut and hazelnut cake, fried with Cheveux

From left to right: Raphael Rodriguez, Sketch sommelier, prepares the wines for tasting; Angela Mount and Roger Tozer listen in as Joe Wadsack holds forth



D'Ange, which went up against a 2006 Willakenzie Estate Pinot Gris.

Here the challenge was to find a wine that could work with the nuttiness of the dish, said Rodriguez.

Tozer found this a winning combination, and particularly liked the Pinot Gris with its "fresh acidity, good tropical notes" which worked well with the nutty, spicy flavours. If anything he would have liked more oakage in the wine, but otherwise he was pretty pleased.

Wadsack felt the wine had actually helped save the dish, as on its own it would not have been as successful. "But together they are great," he said.

"Pinot Noir and anchovies were born for each other. This is a sensational wine you wouldn't expect to find outside Europe"

Third up was a mouseline of turbot and farmed organic salmon, a Tempura of shrimp and button Paris mushroom, which was paired with a 2006 L'Ecole 41 Semillon.

As this is such a full bodied, rich wine, it was felt the food needed to be subtle enough to act as a counter balance. Wadsack was impressed: "I have always liked this wine. Its oakiness, the age of the vine, it is just fantastic value for money. It has a sort of buttered toast taste to it with a touch of lime marmalade."

Mount was also bowled over by the wine. "It's just terrific, but the food was perhaps a little too delicate for it. I could imagine having a funky Camberbet with that," said Wadsack.

Course four saw a "Provençal" terrine of tenderloin of lamb with organic tomato, seasoned by anchovy cream with shaved green olives alongside a 2006 Bergström Cumberland Reserve Pinot Noir.

The challenge for the Sketch team here was to find a matching that balanced the complexity of the wine, and its texture with the spiciness of the anchovy. "Pinot Noir and anchovies were born for each other," said Wadsack. "This is a sensational wine. You would not expect to get this quality of Pinot Noir outside of Europe. It is elegant, restrained, velvety with a textured structure."



Atanasova agreed: “The balances are all right.” Sotiri added: “When I think of New World Pinot, it’s jam, but this is perfect.”

Oregon is well placed to capitalise on Pinot Noir with some 5,000 hectares dedicated to the grape, said Coveney.

Tozer also felt the lamb blended in well and was not too dominant with the wine.

Fifth up was a squash veloute flavoured with cardamom and ginger, salsify of leeks, beetroot, baby onion and mushroom as cassalette and fried “Pont Neuf” potatoes. For this Rodriguez had chosen 2007 St Michelle Wine Estates, Eroica Riesling. It was a resounding success with the panel. “This is a gorgeous wine,” enthused Mount. “Really superb and it works perfectly with the food. We are seeing a wealth of top-quality wines here.”

The panel liked the fact the wine was not too overpoweringly “petroly” and its aromatic tones worked well with the cardamom and ginger in the dish. “This is one of our top selling on-trade wines,” confirmed Portney.

“It perhaps need a little more acidity,” suggested, Sotiri.

Take your partners

Half way through brought a Chantilly Lace of lobster bisque, three colours Basmati rice and horseradish cream, served with 2004 Seven Hills Winery Cabernet Sauvignon. Here Wadsack felt Rodriguez had succeeded in his challenge of matching the tannins with the horseradish and cream and using the freshness of the wine to cut through the sweetness of the rice.

“This worked really well,” agreed Sotiri.

Next up was a dish called “Valencia” of sautéed baby squid, Irish mussels and Irish baby haddock with a fondue of sweet onion, fennel and tomato, a foam of Rond rice, Spanish rice cooked as a paella and spicy pop rice matched with 2006 Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot Noir.

The wine was praised for its ability to offer freshness, and spice to go up against the strong saffron flavours within the dish.

The following dish of Brittany quail, roasted with Lemongrass with a “Rasteau” red wine juice, bacon, braised shallots and poached prunes and red Swiss chard

Mike Coveney of Hilltop Wines chats with Irina Atanasova of Enoteca Turi; and Mike Harrison, sets the scene with Kiri Sotiri of Soho Wines; overleaf Al Portney, of St Michelle Wine Estate

and Mousseline of Agria potato and smoked poacher cheese was an even bigger test for Rodriguez, who chose a North Star, Columbia Valley, 2004 Merlot to go with it – a winery that specialises in Merlot. A more classical food and wine match as he called it.

Wadsack described the wine as one of the “top ten Merlots in the US” with more subtle characteristics than even more expensive California Merlots. Atanasova agreed: “The fruit is there, it is fantastic on the nose and very balanced.” she said. “This is the kind of wine you just sip, sit back and enjoy,” added Mount “The match is perfect.”

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Portney said that “stylistically” this is what they were trying to achieve with their Merlots with smaller-sized grapes and lower yields. But there was a concern that the wine may be too expensive for the main UK market. “People in the UK would settle for a less

sophisticated wine,” stressed Wadsack.

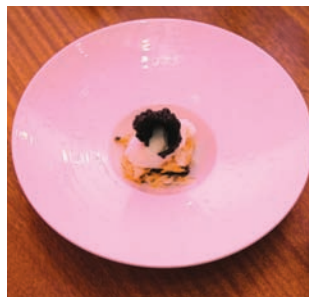
The panel then matched an Erath Estate Selection Dundee Hills 2006 Pinot Noir

With scallops addressed in two ways: roasted and as a mousse with grilled leek and girolle salad and beurre blanc with mustard. Rodriguez said the meaty texture of the scallops made Pinot Noir a natural match. It certainly hit the right spot with the panel. Wadsack said it slipped down “like going on a cresta run on a sunny day” whereas Mount felt it was like being “wrapped in a velvety blanket”.

A beef tartare of diced rib-eye with mustard, gherkins, spring onions, capers, egg mollet, Espelette pepper, parsley, fondant potato and fresh spicy tomato all served with a Lachini Vineyards, 2006 Estate Pinot Noir.

Here it was the tannins in the wine that it was felt well with the seasoning and the rawness and fatness of the tartare.

Harrison felt this was the kind of wine that was its peak now and would then fall away. Tozer thought this was a



THE FOOD AND WINE MENU

1 Carpaccio of sea-bream, Nori seaweed and avocado / Pearls of Soja sauce and Mirin

2005 Pacific Rim Dry Riesling

2 Tarragon consommé / Torrefied Pine nut & hazelnuts cake / Fried Cheveux D'Ange"

2006 Wilakenzie Pinot Gris

3 Mousseline of Turbot & Farmed organic salmon as in Normandy / Tempura of shrimp / Button Paris mushroom

2006 L'Ecole 41 Semillon 2006

4 "Provençal" terrine of tenderloin of lamb / Organic tomato seasoned by an anchovy cream / Shaved green olives

2006 Bergstrom Cumberland Reserve Pinot Noir

5 Squash veloute flavored cardamom and ginger / Salsify, leeks, beetroot, baby onion and mushroom as cassiolette / Fried "Pont Neuf" potatoes

2007 St Michelle Wine Estate Eroica Riesling

6 Chantilly Lace: Lobster bisque / three colours Basmati rice / horseradish cream /

2004 Seven Hills Cabernet Sauvignon

7 Valencia: Sautéed baby squid, Irish mussels and Irish baby haddock / Fondue of sweet onion, fennel and tomato / Foam of Rond rice / Spanish rice cooked as a Paella/Spicy pop rice

2006 Willamette Valley Pinot Noir

8 Brittany Quail: Roasted quail with Lemongrass / Rasteau red wine juice / Bacon, braised shallots and poached prunes / red Swiss chard / Mousseline of Agria potato & Smoked poacher cheese

2004 Northstar Columbia Valley Merlot

9 Scallops addressed two ways: Roasted and as a mousse / grilled leek and girolle salad / beurre blanc with mustard

2006 Erath Estate Selection Dundee Hills Pinot Noir

10 Beef tartare: Diced rib-eye with mustard / gherkins / spring onions / capers / egg mollet / Espelette pepper / parsley / fondant potato / fresh spicy tomato

2006 Lachini Estate Pinot Noir

11 Sliced Montgomery Cheddar / coffee syrup / watercress and chicory salad

2005 St Michelle Canoe Ridge Chardonnay

12 Lorraine: Yellow plum with kirsch / streusel / angelique / fresh walnuts white chocolate ice cream

2007 A to Z Pinot Gris



course that would have worked just as well with the Seven Hills Cabernet – and vice versa. Sotiri was particularly keen on the wine and said it would be ideal for his customers.

The first of the last two courses saw a 2005 St Michelle Wine Estate's Canoe Ridge Chardonnay paired with sliced Montgomery cheddar, coffee syrup, watercress and chicory salad. The wine prompted a debate over the right kind of Chardonnay for the UK palate and whether this style, which is less sweet than classic Californian Chardonnays, would make an interesting alternative.

"Eight out of the 12 wines here are world class. It is about getting Washington and Oregon in front of consumers."

matched with a 2007 A to Z 2007 Pinot Gris, which Rodriguez said was the nearest he had to a dessert wine. The pairing was a success for Tozer and a real alternative to what you would normally use as a pair, he said.

Quantity and quality

Overall the panel was blown away by the quality and consistency of the wines on offer and while there were a couple of unsuccessful matches, the overwhelming majority worked very well. Mount summed up the mood: "There are some staggering wines here. You have to harness varieties such as the Pinot Noirs."

Wadsack agreed: "Eight out of the 12 wines here are world class. It is now about getting the words Washington and Oregon in front of consumers."

He said if the new hierarchy at Oddbins was serious about putting new wines in front of consumers, then it should start with Washington and Oregon.

Atanasova felt the challenge for the regions' wineries was to simplify the message so that they could enjoy better cut through with the trade and then ultimately the consumer. Concentrate on the

"lightness", "freshness" and "crispness" of the wines, she said.

Harrison said it was all about finding the right reasons to talk about these wines so that they could be "pigeon-holed" in the minds of buyers. Ultimately it would come down to price and finding the right price points for the right wines, he stressed.

While they may struggle to meet £4.99 levels, the consensus is they offer fantastic value for money in the £6-£15 bracket.

Tozer felt some of the wines offered better value for money than "big names in Burgundy". "We are looking for something different to offer our customers, and this is very exciting for me," he said.

Coveney, at Hilltop Wines, conceded it was going to be a long process, but that the "foundations are definitely being laid".

Events such as these, along with its generic tasting in January and the London International Wine Fair, were all part of a process to determine which wines are right for the UK market and what needs to be done to make them more competitive.

Sotiri felt that for the off-trade the trick was to get more personalities "like a James May or Oz Clarke" to start pushing these wines and "then they will sell themselves" – providing people could then find them. "They need a bigger profile here," he said.

"But ultimately the best ambassador for these wines is Al Portney, he is one of the most enlightening people I've ever met in the wine world."

Providing, that is, he does not promote these wines as coming from the Pacific Northwest – as that, felt the panel, would confuse people even more.

A confusion that hopefully this tasting and food and wine pairing has gone some way to overcoming.

Our sincere thanks to the food and wine team at Sketch restaurant for hosting and making this event possible, but in particular, sommelier Raphael Rodriguez, gallery head chef Denis Le Bras and executive chef Pascal Sanchez. Also thanks to Hilltop Wines for helping to organise the event and all the UK distributors for supplying the wines including Berkmanns, Bibendum, Fields, Morris and Verdin, Noel Young Wines, Stone Vine and Sun, Stratford's, Wallingford Vintners and the Wine Treasury.