

Pacific specific

Wine drinkers looking for a fresh direction should strike out for the north-west ... there's a whole new world out there



TOM BRUCE-GARDYNE

A friend of mine took an overnight flight from New York to Los Angeles some years ago and woke up as it began its descent. He found himself staring at a fuzzy, green image on a large screen that slowly came into focus. It was Jane Fonda in her leotard urging passengers to join her in an early morning work-out. My friend turned round and was astonished to see an entire plane full of suits gyrating in time like synchronised swimmers.

Americans can be very obedient at times, and this is also true with wine. When Miles, the hero of the film *Sideways*, made it clear that he loved pinot noir as much as he hated merlot, US audiences took the hint. The Burgundy grape was what cool people drank; sales responded accordingly. Never mind it was just a movie, and that Miles is a wine snob whose real problem with merlot is that it is too widespread and easy to say.

He should have tried a Washington State merlot from a producer like Snoqualmie or Charles Smith whose wines will soon

be available in Scotland. I must admit it was the black and white cartoon labels of his Boom Boom Syrah and Velvet Devil Merlot that drew me to Smith's wines at a recent tasting. Here was a producer who didn't take himself too seriously, though he evidently cares what goes in the bottle. These are good wines.

Washington State and its neighbour Oregon are collectively known as the Pacific North-West. Don't worry if you can't place them on the map, as one winemaker at the tasting told me 70% of Americans have the same problem. But if you can picture California, travel 700 miles north to reach the much cooler vineyards of Oregon's Willamette Valley where they specialise in pinot noir. For Washington State's vineyards head inland to the slightly warmer vineyards of Columbia Valley and Walla Walla which lie in the rain shadow of the Cascade mountains and where the range of grapes grown spans everything from syrah to riesling.

It is fair to say that the Pacific North

West is quite a well-kept secret here. The wines of Oregon and Washington State appear bohemian and quirky – an antidote to big-branded, corporate America. And on that score Charles Smith in his shades and dreadlocks should be the region's ambassador. Having got into wine while working in restaurants in California, he spent 11 years in Denmark managing rock bands including the Jesus and Mary Chain-inspired Raveonettes. In the late nineties he motorcycled through Idaho and Washington with the lead singer Sharin Foo, discovered Walla Walla and has never left.

"From my perspective making wine and making music is much the same. You just bang around until you come up with something," says Smith who is proud of the fact he never went to wine school. He is clearly excited about the pioneering opportunities in this relatively young wine region that only really kicked off in the seventies. We should be too. ■ tombg22@googlemail.com

DRINK CHOICES

STAYING IN

Domaine de Vedilhan, 2010, Viognier, 13.5%, Great Grog, £6.89

This southern French vin de pays punches well above its weight on price. It has all the grape's classic character of apricots and peaches, but without any over-ripe notes. The flavour is bright and crisp.

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND

Bourgogne Vieilles Vignes, Nicolas Potel, 2009, 12.5%, Majestic Wine, £11.99

These days £12 is pretty much the starting point for Bourgogne rouge, and it can be insipid compared to succulent New Zealand pinot noirs at the same price. This one is a cut above with a scent of strawberries and some nice, vibrant red fruit on the tongue.

SPLASHING OUT

Snoqualmie, Merlot, 2006, 14%, Henderson Wines, £11

This is classic Washington State merlot. On the nose it threatens to be a little too ripe with its aroma of black cherry jam and sweet spice, but on the tongue it all melds together just fine.

Erath, Oregon, Pinot Gris, 2007, 13%, Peter Green Wines, £12.50

I wanted to review one of Erath's fine pinot noirs, but it seems they are temporarily out of stock. So for now try this complex pinot gris with its ripe, tropical fruit nose that gives way to a flavour of melons and pears and has just the right zip of citrus fruit on the tongue.



Mixology Cardinal Punch



MAL SPENCE

The "mocktail" Cardinal Punch features in Charles H Baker Jr's 1895 publication *Jigger, Beaker & Glass, Drinking Around The World*, where it is described as a typical old-time recipe from Hertfordshire. It is an aromatic, pungent and slightly tart drink, with a wonderful colour.

INGREDIENTS

Cranberry juice
Orange juice
25ml raspberry syrup
25ml lemon juice

Pour equal amounts of the juices into a glass until two-thirds full then add the syrup and lemon juice. Top with sparkling water or ginger ale and garnish with a sliced strawberry and a sprig of mint.



Mal Spence is the award-winning head bartender at Blythswood Square, Glasgow. Visit www.blythswoodsquare.com.



DISTILLERY OF THE WEEK

GLEN ELGIN

Glen Elgin was built by James Carle and William Simpson, a former manager of Glenfarclas, in 1898. Demand for malt from the blenders had never been higher, and Glen Elgin's prospects looked promising, yet within two years the industry was drowning in surplus production. The distillery was sold and bought numerous times, with the stills fired up only to turn cold again. Since 1930 it has been part of what is now Diageo. Glen Elgin's survival was probably never in doubt as its malt has always been highly praised by the blenders. It has long been a key constituent of White Horse and was not released as a single malt until 1977.

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