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## WINE LINE



*Thomas Cottrell is  
Bellevue Club's  
contributing wine  
columnist and  
the owner of La  
Cantina Wine  
Merchants.*

### TRY THESE WONDERFUL WASHINGTON WINES

Washington Wine Month was last month, so you might wonder why am I telling you about it now? Well, one reason is that the popularity of wines from this state is now so great that it's possible to argue that every month is Washington Wine Month. That's what happens when you have more than 500 wineries in the state.

Of course, quantity isn't everything. After all, they have a lot more than 500 wineries down in California, producing ten times more wine than we do. But that's not the relevant criteria. It's the quality of wines coming out of our vineyards that makes folks keep coming back for more.

As true as that observation is, it's equally true that some of our wines are better than others. Which is why we do blind tastings such as the one I attended the other day.

We worked our way through flights of Chardonnay, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon and found some losers, some average offerings and some definite winners. The latter are the wines listed below.

**2005 Ch. Ste. Michelle Chardonnay "Indian Wells Vineyard"** (*Columbia Valley, \$16*)—in some previous vintages I've found this wine to be a bit heavy on the oak. Well done in its oakiness, but definitely in that style. This 2005 version seems to have backed off just a bit on the wood, and is all the better for it. The fruit is a lovely balance to the toastiness of those expensive oak barrels, the acid is fine, and the finish lingers—always a sign of a superior wine.

Our group of tasters picked another wine as even better by one-hundredth of one point. But then, it's not the first time this popular Chardonnay has come out on top. The **2005 Apex Cellars Chardonnay** (*Yakima Valley, \$17*) is consis-

tent with the style they established back in the early '90s: ripe fruit without being "fruity," nice use of oak to add spice and toast, good acid balance. The result shows a polished style, a bit of complexity and an impressive length.

Among the Syrahs I found three favorites. The group picked the **2004 Columbia Crest "Reserve"** (*Columbia Valley, \$23*) as the top wine, and I can see why. It has the dark, jammy style that is so popular, laced with sweet oak and rich body—I thought it almost tasted like a fantastic Aussie Shiraz. And that's a good thing.

Almost as high on my list was the very tasty **2005 Seven Hills Syrah** (*Walla Walla, \$29*). The nose is full of ripe fruit laced with a touch of spicy oak. On the palate I picked up a touch of earthiness that reminded me of the famous wines of the northern Rhône—some of my favorites.

And because I'm a sucker for wines from that region I really enjoyed the **2003 Reiner Syrah** (*Walla Walla, \$37*). Here the Rhône influence is even more pronounced, with a blackberry/green olive/earthy/herbal character that I can't resist. This, and the rich, round texture make it a winner.

I found two wines to like among the Cabernets. The group favored the **2004 Novelty Hill Cabernet Sauvignon** (*Columbia Valley, \$23*), and I concurred. It showed a sweet note, as much from ripe fruit as from oak, laced with a subtle touch of fresh wild herbs that gave it a nice complexity. With its soft, supple finish it proved to be a very drinkable wine right now, and a very tasty one too.

The group picked this wine second, but I marked it a tie with the wine above: **2004 Seven Hills Cabernet Sauvignon** (*Columbia Valley, \$30*). It offers a cedary note in the bouquet, not a little reminiscent of a young red Bordeaux. Spices and herbs joined sweet berry fruit on the palate and lingered through a soft finish—a very pleasing combination, indeed.

So there you have it, a lucky seven collection of wines that shows off just how good Washington wines can be—why not celebrate the fact by trying a few of them?