

LIFESTYLE

MARY EARL | Heat, wind benefit Red Mountain

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By Mary Earl

Some names for eastern Washington vineyards, AVAs and mountains are derived from animals — such as Ciel du Cheval (French for horse heaven), Horse Heaven Hills, Badger Mountain and Rattlesnake Hills. Native American names like Yakima, Naches, Tapteil, Wahluke and Ancient Lakes are also found on the vineyards and AVAs. Some vineyards are named for some early wine pioneers like Mercer, Sagemoor, Weinbau, Dionysus and Bacchus.

But how the heck did Red Mountain get its name? Year-round, there are at least 50 shades of beige on the mountains in and around Columbia Valley.

But then I've never been there in April, when the spring cheatgrass turns the mountain dark red — except for the green patches under vine.

The Red Mountain AVA is the smallest AVA at 4,040 acres with just over half planted to Cabernet, Merlot, Sangiovese, Cab Franc, Syrah, Carménère and the newest darling, Malbec.

There is still a smattering of white grapes, most notably Kiona's old vine Chenin Blanc, with some Semillon, Marsanne, Viognier and Chardonnay. Cooler climate grapes are planted in the nooks and crevices of the hills where shade provides relief from the sun for part of the day.

All that sunshine makes Red Mountain the hottest AVA in Washington State; both in heat units and because some of the 52 vineyards have contributed beautiful bunches of grapes to internationally acclaimed wines.

So what makes this AVA so hot, hot, hot? The climate. The soil composition. The great viticulturists formerly known as farmers.

Being hot and windy is an asset, creating an unfriendly environment for mold and mildew. The soil is high in calcium carbonate and low in pH, which along with its granular consistency, promotes well-established root systems.

The predominant soil types are windblown and include the Warden, Hezel and Scootenay. These types of soils are a combination of sand, silt and loam — a proper mix for exceptional *vitis vinifera*.

And who's making those internationally acclaimed wines, you may well ask?

Well, it all began in the mid-70s, when some of us were still sporting bell bottoms and dancing to the Bee Gees. Kiona's John Williams and Jim Holmes planted the first vines on the south side of Sunset Road. Fortunately, some of those same vines are still in production.

Later, Blackwood Canyon, Hedges Cellars, Oakwood Cellars, Seth Ryan, and Terra Bianca began planting. At the time, Red Mountain was in the Yakima Valley AVA, which is in the really big Columbia Valley AVA. Being defined by something that huge didn't quite give Red Mountain its due. The long crusade for a Red Mountain AVA began and was finally granted in 2001.

Today, a row of Red Mountain grapes from Ciel du Cheval, Klipsun, Kiona, Blackwood Canyon, Obelisco, or Tapteil Vineyards is in high demand. There are even wineries that produce wine from Red Mountain fruit in their Walla Walla wineries.

Knowing a good thing when they saw it, California's Duckhorn, Chateau Ste Michelle and Tuscan giant Antinori invested tidy sums to purchase land, plant vineyards and build wineries.

The Vancouver Canucks owners decided to make their first spectacular foray into the wine industry a couple of years back when they bought a chunk of parcels (518 acres with water rights) for \$8.3 million.

Red Mountain's Bordeaux varietals are rich, colorful, powerful and known for incredible balance with intense black fruit flavors, minerality and good structure.

The widely planted Cabernet clone #8 produces a wine similar to Bordeaux with concentrated fruit, fine-grained tannins and a lovely mineral quality.

Malbec, merlot, Syrah and Carménère are also red hot commodities on Red Mountain. Carménère and Malbec have fallen out of favor in Bordeaux but are lighting up the scoreboard when grown on Red Mountain.

Cooper Wine Company has 41 acres on the corner of Sunset and Hwy 224. Eight of those acres are planted to Carménère and they have produced a wine called Vinizio that includes all six of the Bordeaux grapes. Neil Cooper explained the chocolate aromas and flavors come from the calcium carbonate in the soil of the Scootney Flats.

Frichette Winery is the newest boutique winery on the mountain. The owners, Greg and Shea, changed careers and relocated to Red Mountain to be closer to family. As with most Red Mountain wineries, its portfolio is chalk full of Cabernet, Merlot and a Malbec that stains your glass purple, with blackberry pie aromas and flavors of blackberry and cocoa and a touch of minerality.

Fidelitas has a great deck to sit, sip wine and watch the vineyards grow. Owner winemaker Charlie Hoppes, a much-sought-after consulting winemaker, just completed his 28th vintage of Washington wines. His 12 acres are planted to Bordeaux varietals. The 2013 Malbec is another with very dense color, aromatic with black fruits and spice. It's a wonderful medium-bodied wine to enjoy on the deck with a wedge of aged Gouda and some crusty bread.

Hamilton Cellars is another boutique winery halfway up Sunset Road. Stacy and Russ Hamilton have 10 acres, with 9 ½ planted three years ago under the supervision of veteran Dick Boushey. They also have veteran Charlie Hoppes as their winemaker. Their 2012 Red Mountain Malbec is from the Scootney Vineyards while waiting for their vines to mature. This Malbec has cocoa and black cherry flavors; a dense, glass-staining color and soft tannins.

Premium land, ideal growing conditions, talented farmers and skilled management are qualities that make Red Mountain fruit highly prized by the likes of Quilceda Creek (the highly awarded Washington winery that sources Red Mountain).

Upchurch Cab, Andrew Will and Long Shadows Pedestal have also scored high 90s using Red Mountain fruit.

Another rare and outstanding wine, Kiona Estate 2014 Chenin Blanc Ice Wine, scored 93 points from an AVA not known for whites.

For more information for your next wine country get-a-way, Visit Tri-Cities (www.visittri-cities.com) can handle your needs. And for a designated driver, let me recommend something slow, easy and lots of fun: Red Mountain Trails for a horse-drawn wagon ride through the vineyards to the next tasting room. Treat yourself; it's really a unique way to go.