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# The Rocks District: America's Unique Terroir

The Rocks's District is producing the most distinct and terroir driven wines in the Pacific Northwest" Andrew Brown, Head Winemaker, Watermill Winery.

# The International Wine Review

February 2019

## Report # 70 The Rocks District: America's Unique Terroir

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This report was written by Joel Butler, MW, who is also co-author, with publishers Mike Potashnik and Don Winkler, of a companion report on *The Wines of Washington State Revisited*.

As the Rocks District of Milton-Freewater is located in the state of Oregon, Bree Boskov, MW and the Oregon Wine Board have partnered with IWR in preparing and distributing this report.

## Introduction

A priori, there is something special and distinctive about the wines from this small AVA. The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater (henceforth 'the Rocks District' or 'RDMF') was given AVA designation in February 2015, 18 years after the first modern era, commercial, wine-grapes were planted there in 1997 by Christophe Baron of Cayuse Vineyards.

The Rocks District is producing the most distinct and terroir drive wines in the Pacific Northwest.

– Andrew Brown, Head Winemaker, Watermill Winery

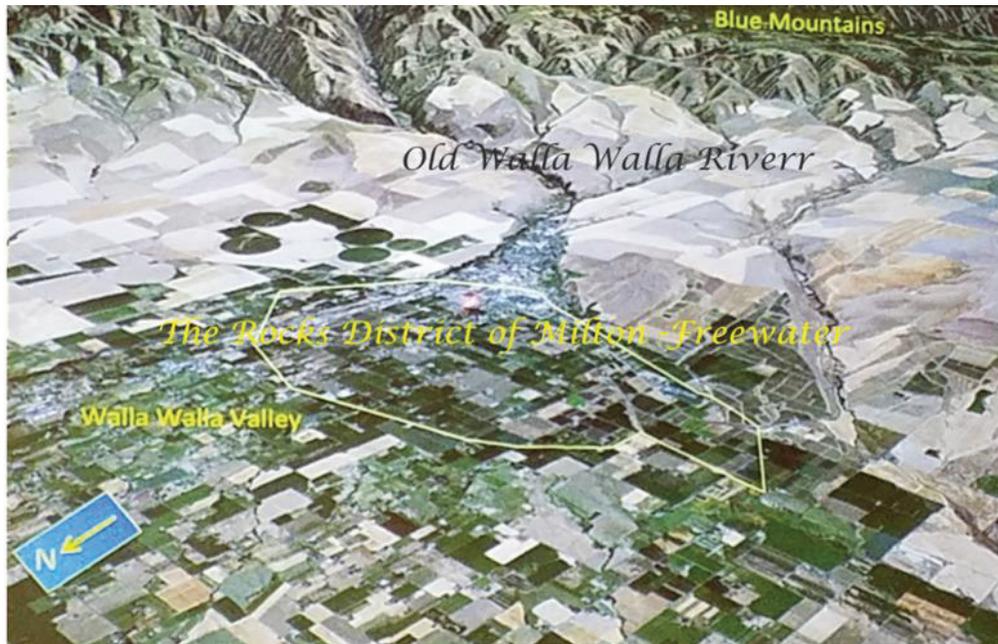
Historically, wine-grapes (Cinsault) were first planted in the late 1800's by Italian immigrant farmers. Located entirely in the state of Oregon, The Rocks District is a sub-region of the greater Walla Walla Valley AVA.<sup>1</sup> In this special report, we examine the unique terroir of the Rocks District, its terroir driven wines, and the agricultural and chemical factors that explain the special aromas and flavors of the Rock District wine. The report also provides extensive tasting notes and ratings of wines from the Rocks District's top producers.

The Rocks District has attracted a small group of outstanding wineries that are crafting wines that reflect the district's unique terroir. Most of these wineries are located in Washington State, but source their grapes from estate vineyards as well as other vineyards within the Rocks District. Some are also members of the Rocks District Winegrowers, an organization that promotes the District's wine industry. The Rocks District has recently attracted prominent investors from California, Washington State and Spain, all of which are establishing their presence in the region with new vineyards and wineries.

## The Rocks District Terroir

The Rocks District AVA's boundaries have been fixed by virtue of a single soil series (Freewater Series) consisting mainly of cobble,

<sup>1</sup>Only wineries with facilities located in Oregon can label their wines as Rocks District of Milton-Freewater according to the TTB regulations. This means that the significant number of wineries located in nearby Walla Walla, Washington, can only label their wines 'Walla Walla Valley', while a winery located in Portland, over 200 miles away, can put Rocks District of Milton-Freewater on the label! We suspect that this rule will change in the near future.



rocky loam and more gravelly silty loam, and a single land form (alluvial fan) created by the Walla Walla River post the Missoula floods, several thousand years ago. The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater AVA is just 3,767 acres; of which 338 are planted with wine grapes<sup>2</sup>. The location of the Rocks District AVA within the Walla Walla Valley and the nearby Blue Mountains and Old Walla Walla River is shown in the adjoining map.

This U.S. Department of Agriculture map above, shows where the Rocks District of Milton-Freewater American Viticultural Area in Oregon is located. The city of Milton-Freewater is in the lower right-hand portion of the map, west of the Walla Walla River.

Geology Professor Kevin Pogue of Whitman College in Walla Walla wrote the AVA submission proposal for the Rocks District. In the summer of 2013 before a group of journalists, he specifically noted: "I designed it to be what I think is the single-most *terroir*-driven AVA in the United States<sup>3</sup>." Pogue also said that vineyards on the rocky soils in the proposed new AVA were acclaimed for their quality as early as 1916. He noted in an earlier work the key nature that distinguishes the District: "Derived from a mixture of loess, Missoula flood sediment, and basalt gravels, the alluvial

soils are texturally and chemically distinct from the loess-based soils in which most Columbia Basin vineyards are planted. From the very first vintage, the wines produced from the cobbly Milton Freewater vineyards were critically acclaimed<sup>4</sup>" [See photo below]



<sup>2</sup> winebusiness.com 10.18.2018 press release

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *Oregon winery restriction sparks comments on The Rocks AVA petition* by [Eric Degerman](#) on March 3, 2014, Great Northwest Wine.com

<sup>4</sup> K. Pogue, 2009, p.15 in *Volcanoes to Vineyards: Geologic Field Trips through the Dynamic Landscape of the Pacific Northwest*; O'Connor, Dorsey, Madin, edit.; GSA 2009

The relatively low altitude between 800-1000' determined that the entire area was repeatedly submerged under Missoula floods (8-15 thousand years ago) that covered the area in sedimentary deposits. Later, these were removed by serious erosion caused by the Walla Walla River flows, depositing huge amounts of basaltic cobblestones. Wind-derived loess and fine sand then settled into the area, which is mixed with the cobbles on the surface, while the subsoils also reveal cobbles and basaltic gravels from the river flows.

Nonetheless, as Kevin Pogue has noted, the cobbly highly porous soils are quite deep, up to 300', with very little top soil. In Chateaneuf du Pape's similar *'galets roulés'* soils, Pogue says the cobbles are only a few feet deep and sit on richer clay soils, which hold water much better. (See map and pictures). "This is one of the only places in the Northwest where you don't have to have a cover crop," he said. "You don't have to worry about the soil eroding or blowing away." (op cit. Degerman) Soil Survey of Umatilla County, Oregon, 1988.



**Soil Pit at Cailloux Vineyard**

The soil pit at Cayuse Cailloux Vineyard is about 1 meter deep, showing the cobblestone and silty topsoil descending into more gravel-pebbly, rocky subsoil. While these cobbles heat up a lot during the day, they cool off rapidly at night, though that day time heat percolates down into the soil. Corollary to the fact of relatively lower altitude on the floor of a valley, the Rocks District periodically suffers from frost and bone-chilling winter weather which can kill buds and even kill a vine, more so than on the surrounding hillsides. Consequently, growers in the lower sections (like SJR Vineyard) bury the top part of the vine in winter, sometimes facilitated by using a low mini-head training (MHT) system they created at SJR Vineyard. (see caption)



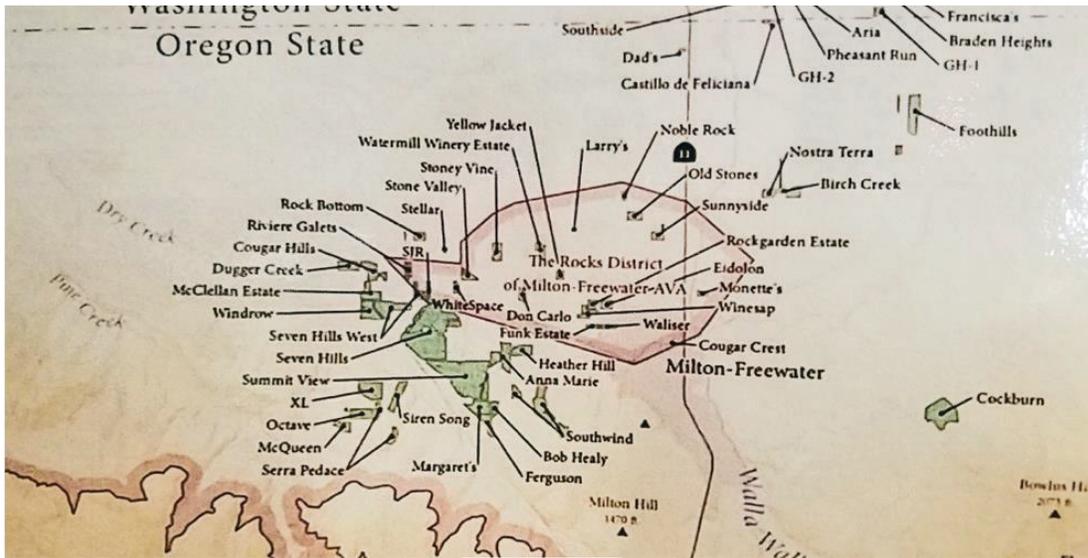
**MHT Syrah at Delmas/SJR Vineyard ©Delmas**

Geographically speaking, the spread of established (and future) vineyards in the Rocks District lies on a quite homogenous landscape, with the somewhat higher vineyards in the southeast corner, and the lowest vineyards in the northwest sector. Overall, the very nature of the Freewater Soil series means extremely well-drained soils. Like most of the greater Walla Walla area, these vineyards require irrigation to survive, given the semi-arid climate with 12-16" (300-400mm) yearly precipitation.

The map shows some Rocks District vineyards and nearby Seven Hills/ SeVein Project vineyards (all outside the Rocks District AVA). Many of them were established on the foundation of fruit-growing farms favoring cherries, apples and pears that date back to the 1870's. These were heavily irrigated through the development of a large canal system into the area drawing from the Walla Walla River on the east side of the AVA as it now flows north."

## The Unique Wines of the Rocks

As you read tasting notes on Rocks District wines and those of local winemakers and other wine-writers there are certain descriptors that keep cropping up for red wines, Syrah foremost among them are: *gamy, savory, bacon, graphite, ferrous, saline, black raspberry, licorice, porky, meaty, good acidity, fleshy texture*. Anyone who tastes wines for a living, or who enjoys a wide variety of wines, generally agrees that wines from the Rocks District show singular, identifiable traits, especially so with Syrah, but noted in other wines as well to a lesser, if still noticeable, degree. Why do the Rocks District's wines smell and taste so particular and identifiable?



Trying to get at the reasons why this 'identity' is consistently recognized and is 'real' required me to ask myself first, in which other wines have I experienced similar character? Then, what aspects of terroir, viticultural/oenological practices might account for this congruency? The Rocks District is one of the few, well-defined and limited appellations in the world that overall, does have: consistent continental climate, near-homogenous soil/geology and a limited set of varieties led by Syrah that almost all vineyards grow. As an aside, though a germane one, in the New World one of the only other appellations of note with similar well-defined conditions is Coonawarra, S. Australia, with its quasi-maritime climate, eight square mile cigar-shaped terra rossa over limestone geology and Cabernet Sauvignon dominated varietal mix with Syrah in second position. Also, like the Rocks District, Coonawarra has a long century-plus tradition of farming that began with fruit and grape-growing as well as ranching.

The discrete nature of the Rocks District's vineyards on the alluvial fan deposits of the Walla Walla River, within a relatively small area, is the strongest defining character of the AVA and the one which provides the foundation for the unique flavor profile of most wines made there; above all Syrah. Discussions with winemakers and viticulturalists in the Rocks District elicited similar responses: the warm climate, the long growing season, the cobblestones reflecting heat back into the vineyard at night, clonal selection, and so on. I wasn't satisfied completely, though what I was told seemed plausible and contributory. But, taking Syrah as the prime example, many Walla Walla Valley wines from non cobbly-alluvial soils, grown on the more widespread loess-silt soils

also show black berry, graphite, and meaty notes. We have further noted that Syrah grown at fine vineyards in Yakima Valley as diverse as Red Willow and Boushey highlight savory, dark fruit and finely tannic character.

It shouldn't come as a big surprise that the Rocks District's wines most resemble the top *crus* of the Northern Rhone Valley: Cornas, Côte Rôtie, and to a lesser degree Hermitage and St Joseph where the geology also reflects volcanic action, the soils are free-draining, rocky/gravelly, and are Syrah-dominant. Many of them share similar high pH, savory, black fruit, ferrous and graphite/meat flavors, combined with often gamy, black raspberry, smoky- saline aspects framed by good acidity yet rounded texture.



**Christophe Baron**, the proprietor of Cayuse Vineyards, has brought fame to the Rocks District for his outstanding wines. Originally from Charly-sur Marne, in the Champagne region of France, he studied viticulture in Champagne and Burgundy with the intention to enter his family business. As fate would have it, in 1993 he received an internship at a winery in the Walla Walla Valley and later gained additional experience in Australia, New Zealand, Romania and Oregon. While on a return social visit to Walla Walla, Christophe was travelling near the Oregon/Washington border when by chance he encountered an open field littered with acres of softball-sized stones which reminded him of the cobblestones of Chateaufort-du Pape of his native France. Although others thought he was crazy, he purchased the property and planted his first vineyard in 1997 “knowing that vines need to struggle in difficult ground in order to provide their best”. He called this property Cayuse, a name derived from the French word “cailloux” which means stones. Today, Cayuse consists of six vineyards totally 60+ acres and Christophe is crafting some of the finest and most acclaimed wines in Oregon and the nation.

## Wine Chemistry of the Rocks

To understand better the unique characteristics of the Rocks District’s wines, I turned to Kevin Pogue and Timothy Donahue. Timothy is Director of Winemaking and Instructor of Enology at the Walla Walla Community College/College Cellars, who has had ground level experience in the area, and an M.S. in Oenology. Their analyses based upon the geology of the AVA and the viti-vini practices engaged there, offers a much greater rational and explanation for the Rocks District’s identity.

We have often heard that it is the high iron and copper content contained in the sometimes reddish-color cobblestone deposits from the Walla Walla River that is responsible for the mineral, spicy, earthy or ‘ferrous’ character of the wines. Professor Pogue tells a different story: “Iron and copper content in Rocks District soils is no more than in loess-based soils, but there is a very high amount of copper in the wines. This is due to reduction happening during fermentation, and copper added after the ferments as a remedy.”

Timothy Donahue explains why he thinks the wines of this AVA are the way they are based on chemistry and a personal history. It is the best explanation I have heard for the unique characteristics noted in wines from the Rocks District. It is not a simple one. Donahue succinctly states that what tasters perceive as the Rocks District ‘funk’ is “all sulfides, which are dialed back with copper additions used essentially as a fining agent (CuSO<sub>4</sub>-Copper Sulphate, blue in color). These sulfides undergo chemical changes in the wine and show up as CuSO<sub>3</sub> (Copper Sulphite, red in color at room temperatures). Most of the Rocks District’s wines utilizing this treatment are at the legal limit for copper.

From a viticultural perspective, Donahue argues that temperature drives plants, and hydraulic pressure drives the rate of temperature increase. He notes that loess soils are like a ‘big bucket of water—they take a long time to warm up.’ But the geology of the Rocks District is different, as there effectively is no soil, just rock; the ground warms up and cools off rapidly. Bud break happens earlier, often two to three weeks before loess soils, which leads to longer hang time on the vine to arrive at maturity. In the summer, the soils in this AVA get warm quickly. Syrah, according to Donahue, is *different* from other varieties. Unlike most, Syrah will keep transpiring water even when it is hot, instead of shutting down. “Thus, it will pump other things into the grapes, including a lot of Calcium [Ca] and Potassium [K], especially the latter. This then leads to high pH yet decent acidity in the grapes, which certainly then can lead to sulfide issues later.”

In the Rocks District, furthermore, these conditions then lead to a truncated season. Syrah is a relatively early ripener compared to the Cabernets, and even Grenache and Mourvedre. For later ripening varieties, Donahue notes, the effects of high potassium, reduction and sulfide funk are less notable, as he notes, “Potassium is the big dog in buffering capacity to reduce or increase pH. Potassium can go so high in the Rocks District that it buffers capacity to obtain lower pH. [Winemakers] then find

themselves adding a ton of tartaric acid to attempt to get lower pH, but this doesn't strongly change the pH." As the season progresses and cools down in E. Washington, in loess soils, the rapid soil cooling leads to the need to pick sooner. In the Rocks, however, Donahue points out that "once we hit September 10, or 40° F, the plants shut down; no big sugar increase, but hang-time is extended. When the cold comes and the leaves begin to yellow, the vines start dumping K into grapes (in effort to get rid of acidity) to make them edible to birds (which is the whole point of grape biology to begin with from the vine's point of view!)" This phenomenon, according to him, happens as well in Virginia (and also likely in the Northern Rhone—JB) for example. Importantly, when it happens there "little, or no, tartaric acid is left in the grapes, only lactic or acetic acids. So, maybe as a winemaker you decide to add tartaric to correct for the deficiency, if allowed."

Two scenarios can then occur:

1. When there is no tartaric left, no K is precipitated out of the wine; there is still around 2 grams/liter of K in the wine and [wait for it] Donahue asserts, "this is what gives the mouthfeel, acid/minerality and salinity typical of Rocks Syrah especially. The pH, meanwhile remains high."
2. From his own family experience planting a Syrah vineyard (2000) in Colorado's Grand Valley in the old Colorado River bed composed of alluvial deposits similar to the Rocks District, a prime fruit growing region, Donahue explained why he understood quickly the likely issue for the Rocks District. "When we got the first crop in 2004-5, it had the 'funk' (dimethyl sulphide-DMS). WHY?" From his oenology and basic chemistry studies, Donahue was aware that in most fruit tree orchards, the primary fertilizer is ammonium sulphate  $[(NH_4)_2SO_4]$ . When grapes are then planted the vine uptakes the sulphate and dumps it systemically as cystine and methionine, which is then expressed as DMS! "This is very difficult to remove from wine," he notes, where in small amounts smells like canned asparagus or cooked corn, but in large amounts moves towards quince or truffle aromas.

## Getting Rid of the Funk

"We ripped the vineyard, put in new irrigation, added new manure, and injected SO<sub>2</sub>. We changed the vineyard's chemistry. We got

rid of the funk by all these new nutrients added to reduce ammonium sulphate pickup, so the wine lost the funk and was more fruit forward. The situation, I believe, was really like the Rocks District today."

Because of his experience in Colorado and understanding of basic chemistry, Donahue postulates that because virtually all the Rocks District vineyards are planted on old apple orchards, they are pulling up large amounts sulfides already. This is helping he believes to lower the amounts of DMS in the soil due to roots going deeper as the vines mature. Much of the problem he suggests, has to do with the shallower root zones of so many young vines where much of the fertilizer residue still resides, and thus DMS aromatics/flavors are quite obvious. As the roots go deeper, less DMS pickup will happen.

To alleviate some of the issues moving into the future with Rocks District wines, especially Syrah, Donahue suggests picking earlier which also will correlate with lower pH levels. A number of producers like Buty and Cayuse are doing this. There is also, he notes, the fact that cooler years show less 'funk' because the harvest window comes sooner and again the wines show lower pH and less K pickup.

For now, he comes back to a longer term notion. "Wait for mature vines to dominate, work in the vineyards to encourage deeper root structures through more judicious (less!) irrigation so water uptake is less, and therefore less DMS pickup. He is encouraged by the fact that today, picking levels around 24 degrees Brix is the norm. "People are getting bragging rights now since they are no longer making water adjustments to the must."

The 'funk' is real. While some producers like it, they will be happier when more wines from the AVA have less of the flat, high pH softness but retain the gamy, earthy, aromas and flavors while showcasing more of the deep fruit character the grapes here provide naturally. Time will tell if producers manage to craft wines in such a manner, but given some of the recent, stellar examples noted below, it will happen sooner than later.

# Tasting Notes and Ratings: Rocks District of Milton- Freewater

Tasting notes and ratings of Rocks District wines are provided below for the following wineries: Beresan Winery, Betz Family Winery, Buty Winery, Cayuse Vineyards, Maison Bleue, Northstar, Proper Wines, Rasa Vineyards, Reynvaan Family Vineyards, Rotie Cellars, Rulo Winery, Saviah Cellars, Seven Hills Winery, Siren Song, Tertulia Cellars, The Walls Vineyards, Two Vintners, Watermill Winery and Zerba Estate.

Prices, where noted, are suggested retail price from the winery. Unless otherwise noted, the wines are all produced exclusively from RDMF AVA located vineyards, and tasted in September and October, 2018, not blind, usually in the presence of the winemaker or owner.

**Balboa/Beresan:** 2015 Balboa Pandemonium red, Syrah 96%, Viognier/Roussanne 4%. Eidolon Vyd, planted 2008. Tom Glase, winemaker. Medium plus ruby, hint violet color. Deep blackberry, less overt game/pork aromas. Quite firm acids and tannins. Very un-Rocks District-like on palate, with strong cassis-graphite finish, a well-structured wine, if a bit tight. Should age 4-6 years. 14.6% abv. 16.5+/89 \$50

**Balboa/Beresan:** 2014 Balboa Malbec, Eidolon Vyd. Dark ruby violet. More classic bacon-raspberry, ferrous Rocks District bouquet. Firm acid/ tannin structure focuses good ripe fruit leading to signature AVA saline finish. A bit narrow perhaps, but still fairly tasty. Keep 3-5 years. 14.5% 16.5/87 \$33

**Balboa/Beresan:** 2013 Beresan Cabernet Franc, Waliser Vyd. Planted 2005. Medium ruby. Black fruit/currant and light herbal notes and some graphite in nose. Medium body. Fine tannins, good focus and forward finish. Enjoyable. 14.5% 16.5+/89 \$36

**Balboa/Beresan:** 2012 Beresan Stone River Red; Cabernet Sauvignon 35%, Syrah 25%, Merlot 25%, Cabernet Franc 15%, Waliser and Yellow Jacket Vyds. Medium ruby with a hint of garnet at rim. Fairly chewy tannins without as much Rocks District gamy notes except in finish. Medium body and moderate length on finish. Near maturity. 14.4% 16.5/86 \$36

**Balboa/Beresan:** 2012 Beresan Cabernet Sauvignon. Medium ruby, some garnet. Somewhat abrupt and short flavors, though shows Rocks District gamy-ferrous mineral notes. A bit past best. 14.6% 16/85 \$36

**Betz Family Winery:** 2016 Domaine des Pierres Syrah, Ancient Stones Vyd. Planted 2007 to Phelps and Tablas Creek clones originally by Waters Winery. 75% whole cluster, foot trod partially. 10% new French oak aging for 18 months. Vineyard purchased in 2014-12 acres. 3.9 pH/no acid adjustment. Medium ruby. Classic, RDMW gamy-bacon/pork, almost ferrous bouquet, with graphite accents. Fleshy, mineral, black raspberry palate. Good length, pretty fresh and

fine dark berry/graphite flavors. Moderate tannins with evident Rocks District 'salami' finish. First commercial release. Very good. Real depth and sense of balance. Keep 4-6 years. 13.5% 17.5/93 \$62 (club only)

**Buty Winery:** 2016 Rock Garden Estate Red; Mourvedre 73%, Grenache 17%, Syrah 10%. Rock Garden Estate Vyd, planted 2008-09. Medium ruby. Bold, berry-earth nose. Supple, spicy game, black raspberry/earthy flavors. Peppery finish, with fresh meaty flavors, soft tannins & good acidity. Not as deep as Syrah below, but very good Rhone blend. Keep 3-4 years. 13% 17-/90-91 \$48

**Buty Winery:** 2014 Rediviva of the Stones Red; Syrah 77%, Cabernet Sauvignon 13%, Mourvedre 10%. Rock Garden Estate. Denser ruby than above, hint of black. Darker berry, less raspberry and earthier bouquet than above. Deep flavors, rich, full, dark black berry fruit with strong meaty-ferrous accents and solid, strong finish. Fine tannins, moderate acid frame the wine and suggest 5- 7 years aging would be warranted. 14% 17-17.5/92 \$66

**Cayuse:** 2015 God Only Knows Grenache; Grenache 90%, 10%[GOK]. Armada Vyd. by wine studio/cellars. Medium ruby, hint garnet. Medium dense, crunchy black cherry fruit, fine acidity & solid tannins. Low yield of 1.5 tons/acre. A lot of whole clusters used. Darker cherry flavors; good cherry- chocolate ganache finish. Not overripe or jammy. Shows strong mineral/baked earth ferrous notes- long finish. Keep 5-6 years. 14.2% 17.5/94 \$170 (2014)

**Cayuse (Horsepower Vineyards):** 2015 Horspower Sur Echallas Vineyard Grenache. Named after horse stables nearby, where the horses used by Cayuse live. They work this tightly spaced vineyard farmed biodynamically where the vines are planted 'sur echallas'--trained up individual stakes.[4800 vines/acre]. It is located just west of the Cailloux Estate vineyard. Fine deep ruby. Black cherry/light licorice and peony floral scents in nose accent a lovely tension between fruit and mineral salt leading to a hint of graphite on finish. This wine shows strong blood orange/pomegranate, then savory aromas/flavors. These are further defined by very focused, rich ferrous, earthy flavors. Quite saline finish! Very lovely style, not over ripe also has excellent length. Smoky creosote notes come up with aeration, and the wine shows more Gigondas structure a la Domaine Raspail. Quite fresh in finish and should keep 3-5y years. 13.8% 17.5/93-4. \$175

**Cayuse:** 2012 NO Girls Syrah; From vineyard by wine studio, too. Lovely medium ruby- violet. Strong, earthy black raspberry, olive and ferrous nose. Rich, porky/ bacon smoky flavors and bouquet. Fine licorice on finish. Good tannins, evolving well. Shows length and freshness. Some blood, spice and hint of Cornas-like 'rôti' notes. Very balanced, about ready.13.3%.17.5/94

**Cayuse:** 2014 Cayuse Syrah Cailloux Vyd Christophe Baron's original Rocks District vineyard, planted 1997. Nice deep ruby with hint of violet but not dense. More purple fruit bouquet; floral violet perfume (6% Viognier), less gamy, more fruit. Stylish, bittersweet chocolate, medium bodied, clean, fresh savory flavors; more acid, finer tannins than No Girls. Elegant, structured, little oak influence (10% new); more charcoal, less bacon!-- Côte Brune -style. Refined, dense, licorice well-structured finish showing lovely fruit;

clean & stylish reflecting only medium high pH. Excellent, to keep 5- 7 years. 13.6% 18/95 \$125 (2016)

**Cayuse:** 2011 Bionic Frog Syrah; Coccinelle Vyd, planted 1998, closer to Milton Freewater about 2 miles from studio/winery. This vineyard is farthest SE of Christophe's vineyards in Rocks District. Very deep ruby color, still. Dense, Hermitage-like black berry-cassis, inky bouquet. Very grantic, Hermitage *Bessards* focus of deep berry fruit. Savory but not bacony-quite fresh, youthful, lovely mineral flavors, almost saline. Ferrous, light vanilla and subtle, new French oak aromas (10%) though aged all in Foudres of 12hl. Fine savory, fresh and elegant flavors. Refined integrated tannins frame a long finish. Needs 4-5 years more. 13.8% 18/95 \$250 approx.

**Cayuse:** 2015 The Tribe Syrah, Horsepower Vineyard, just west of Cailloux, and planted in very narrow 3x3.5 feet spacing similar to above for the horses and all biodynamic as well. Planted in 2009. Fuller ruby violet to above of course given youth. Pure graphite berry, no saline or tapenade here in nose. Violet-berry perfume extraordinary. Fermented 80-100% whole cluster. Deep fruity, concentrated fruit with fine tannins- elegant yet rich graphite-licorice flavors to finish. Shows long finish, elegant length, fine density and is very clean and fresh. This shows salinity and savory notes on finish after the deep purple fruit in nose and mid-palate. Keep 5- 7 years. 13.6% 18/95 \$120

**Cayuse:** 2014 Hors Categorie Vineyard Syrah; 1st release, 2nd crop from the vineyard. Planted at 1360-1470' on steep slopes off the North Fork Walla Walla River Road about 9.5 miles SE of the Winery. Slopes vary from around 40-60% inclination. Dense ruby-violet. Quite savory, black fruit, some olive, more stony-ferrous notes. Firmer tannins than above wine. Soil contains about one-third clay, so vines grafted on 3309 rootstock given possible phylloxera. More compact, rich flavors, less bacon, less pH-acid odd imbalance as distinct from Rocks District wines. Quite structured, mineral rich flavors; graphite black fruit; no new oak. All fermented in concrete tanks. Denser licorice finish. High extract yet fresh firm acid. This is very meaty, yet pure fruit; again like Hermitage Bessard granitic black fruit/graphite. Strong dense and firmer finish. Needs 7-10 years. 1.5-2 tons/acre yield. 14.1% 18/96 \$240

**Cayuse:** 2017 God Only Knows Grenache, Armada Vyd; from Foudre- **barrel sample**. Floral, fresh, graphite black cherry pomegranate and spicy red pepper flavors and aromas. A bit of CO2 still; fresh vibrant and should be delicious when bottled. Lovely fine freshness with typical Grenache strawberry notes as well. 13.8% 17/91-92

**Maison Bleu:** 2016 Voyageur Syrah, The Rocks District & Columbia Valley; Syrah from Stone Valley, Yellow Jacket (both RDMF) and Les Collines (Walla Walla) Vyds. 3.59pH. All whole berry, 2 week cuvaion, 18 months in used French oak barrels. Medium crimson-violet. Blue/black berry, pure mineral fruit flavors with less meaty/pork notes than some. Very pure with good length and freshness. Nicely focused to keep 4-6 years. 13.2% 17-/90 \$50

**Maison Bleu:** 2016 Graviere Syrah' All Stone Valley Vyd., planted 2001. 3.51pH. Fine crimson-magenta ruby. Similar elevage as above, but 10% new French oak to above. Bacon/salami, blued

berry nose. Medium body. Firming tannins and moderate acid (none added) provide structure and length. Solid fruit definition with rich fresh flavors and accented by lovely graphite on finish. Shows fine depth of fruit for aging 5-7years. 13.7% 17+/92 \$55

**Northstar:** 2014 Syrah; Vineyard across Street from Cayuse (*Watermill Vyd-Browne Family*). Good purple ruby. Some game notes, but less overtly graphite-porky aromas. More direct black fruit aromas. Dense, roasted smoky meat on finish of Rocks District fruit though. Fine tannins, good length, not too pH-y, but perhaps lacks the finesse of Reynvann/Cayuse. Lovely flavors; solid mid- palate, firming tannins. A bit less alcohol would be ideal, but this shows fine character overall for the first Rocks District effort from Northstar. 14.5% 17/91 \$50

**Proper Wines:** 2016 Proper Estate Syrah; Vineyard planted 2007. Made by Sean Boyd, (Rotie Cellars) with whom Proper has merged since January 2018. Medium dark ruby. Strong, ferrous saline palate of Rocks District fruit. Black raspberry, Crozes/Cornas-like ferrous/roasted earth aromas, with the fruit framed by aging in 18% new French oak barrels. Fine, fresh cassis fruit flavors also show refined tannins and fresh acidity. Beautiful Côte Rôtie-like raspberry-graphite aromas; Very lively, long finish and savory notes. Excellent finesse like Buty but even more length. 3.8pH. 13.96% 17++/94 \$65

**Rasa Vineyards:** 2014 Veritas Sequitur Syrah; SJR Vyd. Garnet ruby, firm and fine, ferrous graphite palate with spicy black pepper accents. Good acid balance. This shows nice style, real elegance, and plush tannins. Still lacks some of the 'density' of flavor such as shown by Buty, Saviah, Rotie etc. Keep 3-5 years 13.7% 16.5-17/88-90 \$95

**Reynvaan:** 2016 Grenache Blanc; In the Rocks Estate Vineyard, planted first in 2005. Reynvaan now has about 25 acres in the Rocks District. Platinum yellow-green. Richly fruited, more mineral and less crisp than Rotie Grenache Blanc (due to MLF). More nutty flavors showing some oak vanilla, though aged mostly in neutral French oak barrels. Ripe deep flavors; more S. Rhone-like richness/glycerol aspect to this wine. Quite peachy. 13.5% 16+/88 \$55

**Reynvaan:** 2016 Viognier In the Rocks Vineyard. Hazy lemon-gold. All organic farming, not yet biodynamic. Bright, rich minerally, nutty aromas/flavors-more honey than peachy. All spontaneous ferments. Some mineral, slightly nutty, bitter apricot-skin flavors in finish. N. Rhone style. Less overtly opulent, fruit-driven. shows a lot of character. 13.1% 17-/90-91 \$60

**Reynvaan:** 2016 Queen's Road White; Marsanne 50%, Viognier50%. Minerally, more citrus fresh lemon-orange pithy flavors with firmer acid and less phenolic bitterness than above. More time in oak has smoothed it out. Nicely done, with more tropical flavors, yet pear as well of Marsanne. Aged 60% in new French oak barrels. This one really works! 13.2% 17/92 \$60

**Reynvaan:** 2016 In the Rocks Syrah, 5% Viognier co fermented. Medium ruby, hint violet. Strong, floral- graphite raspberry aromas, enriched and enveloped by some light toasty notes from aging in 25-30 % new French oak barrels. Savory, raspberry fruit flavors, fine tannins and balanced acidity. Sweet plush flavors lead to a savory finish. No tapenade, yet more spicy, bacon and gaminess

on finish. Some black berry notes, too, and then distinctive and strong creosote scents and flavors [campfire] come up, reminiscent of fine northern Rhone Syrah's. Very stylish, to keep 5-7 years. 13.5% 17+/93 \$85

**Reynvaan:** 2016 The Contender Syrah; co-fermented with 4% Marsanne. Medium deep ruby, hint violet. Very perfumed floral violet notes, less savory and more driven typical Syrah berry nose. The wine shows fine fruit, soft tannins & elegant structure. More simple primary flavors than above. Not the density, but good fruit. Resiny, elegant flavors are framed by supple tannins and moderately firm acidity. Firm finish and good definition, if not the complexity and layers of the above wine. 13.2% 17/92 \$85

**Reynvaan:** 2016 Stonessence Syrah; aged in small percentage of new French oak puncheons. Denser, black pepper, black fruit/licorice aromas-- more Hermitage than Côte Rôtie-like. Lovely purity of fruit. Some savory dark berry and light tapenade flavors with distinctive blueberry notes. Dark, fresh but brooding intensity, with some new oak vanilla toast accents (15% new), which add nuance. Graphite/berry fruit flavors with a purity of character, and well balanced, less pH-y than above wine. It also has stronger structure and tannins for aging. Stylish long and well balanced. age 6-8 years. 13.3% 17.5+94-95 \$100

**Reynvaan:** 2016 The Classic Red Bordeaux Blend; [release Spring 2019] Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc. Dark ruby. Strong cassis-graphite, black fruit notes and sweet coffee-mocha aromas (aged in oak-50% new French oak barrels). Floral, black cherry-savory Rocks District character overrides varietal notes. Good fruit, supple tannins and fresh acidity all contribute to the wine's finesse and freshness. But there is also that weird Rocks District pH tanginess on finish. Should age well for 5-7 years at least. 13.3% 17+/93 \$85

**Rotie Cellars:** 2016 Northern Blend, Syrah/Viognier (5%). Rotie Rocks Estate planted 2013, this is 2nd vintage. Has >4pH, 5.6TA. 30% whole cluster. Spontaneous ferment, aged in 3rd fill French oak 16 months. Medium+ ruby, hint violet. Fat round texture (high pH), yet with mineral-saline side which mimics acid. Lovely bacon, meaty black pepper and rich raspberry flavors. The wine finishes with fine-grained polished tannins. More bacon/salami than Betz. For such young vines, this is a really lovely wine with 4 -6 years future. 14.4% 17+/91 \$48

**Rulo:** 2017 Viognier, River Rock Vyd, planted 2001-2002. 3.15 pH. Done in stainless. Clove, fresh exotic, light tropical aromas. Crunchy, fresh flavors with spicy orange flower, citrusy finish. Good length and very balanced, showing what Viognier can be with some sense of restraint, yet shows the richness of the variety well. 14.3% 17+/91 \$28.00

**Rulo:** 2009 Viognier; River Rock Vyd. 1st vintage of Viognier! Still fresh! (screwcap). Pale color, some reductive, thiol sulphide aromas in nose, and less exotic and tropical compared to 2017. Nonetheless, good sweet peach nectarine on finish. Very good, with still vibrant flavors and length so similar in nose & palate to the younger wine, if faded. 14.5% 17+/91 Library selection.

**Rulo:** 2015 Chardonnay; Freewater Rocks vyd. Planted 2008 to Cellillo and FPS15 (Wente?) clones. Full MLF 3.68pH, 10 months

in French oak barrels with periodic batonnage (lees-stirring). Yellow gold green. Earthy peach, ripe tropical flavors with some lemon citrus on finish. Shows maturity. 13.2% 16+/88 \$30

**Rulo:** 2014 Silo Syrah; River Rock Vyd. 3.47pH, 6.45TA. 85-90% whole berry and 3 day cold soak. Aged in new and 2 year old French oak barrels for 22 months. Medium- dense ruby violet-crimson. Pretty fresh nose, with hint of bacon, vanilla-raspberry fruit as well as some Rocks District peppery spiciness. Crisp finish (acid adjusted to balance) and very well balanced. Should age well 5-7 years. 14.6% 17-/90 \$35

**Rulo:** 2003 Silo Syrah. Dark ruby-garnet still! Very solid for age, though some VA shows through on top of earthy, black fruit-tapenade bouquet. Gamy, black fruit flavors; definitely some oxidation, but also mineral inflected black fruit -olive tapenade gamy flavors of the Rocks District. Rich, ripe still sappy, with graphite flavors, firm acid, but a bit too much tannic grip to finish, showing declining fruit and age. A solid effort, all in all, especially for first harvest fruit. 14.5% 16-16.5/86-88 Library sample

**Saviah Cellars:** 2014 Syrah Estate; Fruit from Watermill, Anna Marie, Funk Vyds. Dark ruby. Earthy, graphite-ferrous olive aromas. Medium full savory flavors. Fine fruity, black peppery flavors with medium intense tannins and not too evident alcohol warmth on finish. Good spiciness, nice freshness and solid finish. Keep 4-6 years. 14.5% 16.5/89 \$32

**Saviah Cellars:** 2016 Funk Estate Syrah; Planted 2007, 950' elevation. 4% Viognier co-fermented. 30% whole cluster, aged in 5hl puncheons, 20% new French oak. Medium ruby. Fresh, savory, rare meat aromas with ripe blood orange & some coffee/oak accents as well. Fine tannins, medium acid frame quite spicy [Chinese 5 spice?], gamy meat flavors. Good weight yet fresh. A bit briary on finish. With aeration, distinctive suggestion of peppery black olive arises. Solid wine if less finesse than Cayuse, but quite nice and should age well for 5-7 years. 14.6% 17/91 \$60

**Saviah Cellars:** 2015 The Stones Speak Syrah; Funk Estate Vyd. Blackish ruby. Strong, deep black fruit/graphite, gamey, ferrous nose-pretty classic Rocks District! Fresh, saline black berry and red pepper flavors. Firm, mineral center with graphite on finish. Medium tannins, moderate acid, no heat. Very good for this hot vintage. Keep 4-6 years. 14.6% 17.5/93 \$62

**Seven Hills:** 2017 Seven Hills Vineyard Wines Grenache, SJR Vyd. First Rocks District wine from this producer! Pale ruby. Baked strawberry jam, gamy aromas. Somewhat briary fruit flavors and finishes with cooked notes. Alcohol on finish is out of balance, though. Not especially interesting 14.8% 14.5/75 \$?

**Siren Song Wines:** 2015 ASV Syrah; Ancient Stones Vyd. [northwest of Powerline Vyd. near Cayuse; Gramercy and Waters-founded Phelps/Tablas Creek clones. 4 pH. Planted 2000. Medium ruby, hint violet. Stony, good graphite and spicy black/red pepper aromas. Nicely fruited, well balanced mineral flavors, though odd acid balance offset by fresh, very much Rocks District flavor profile. Not bad length, either. 13.8% 17/90 \$54

**Siren Song Wines:** 2015 ASV 4 Cabernet Sauvignon; Clone 4 Mendoza. Brown, ruby garnet, maturing color already! A bit flat on finish, though it shows Rocks District ferrous, earthy dark red fruit

flavors. Soft tannins, more advanced than ideal or expected. Drink soon, given high pH 13.8% 16/85 \$54

**Siren Song Wines:** 2015 ASV 6 Cabernet Clone 6 Jackson (pre-phylloxera probably). Darker garnet ruby, less mature. Riper sweeter fruit, already mature, with soft tannins, more black fruit, gamy berry nose. Supple and ripe flavors, with more length than above, and meaty, warm earth notes too. More complete, but still somewhat disappointing for this great clone. 13.8 16.5/88 \$54

**Siren Song Wines:** 2015 Cabernet Franc; As all above, Ancient Stones Vyd. Medium ruby, less garnet. Fuller fresh, cedary-herbal red pepper and gamy graphite raspberry nose. Quite stylish, savory-bacon flavor on palate with Rocks District spiciness, good acid, solid length and ripe raspberry, near Loire-like balance. A bit too spendy, but very good and 2nd only to Syrah in portfolio quality. 13.8% 17/91 \$54

**Tertulia Cellars:** 2016 Grenache; Riviere Galets Vyd. Planted 2009, Ryan Raeber winemaker. Violet blue-red. Floral, blue fruit, light game/strawberry nose. Medium body. Firm acid and fresh, clear lightly oaky flavors (foudres?) Bright finish and not soupy or alcoholic. Nicely done if not especially long. 13% 16.5/88 \$35

**Tertulia Cellars:** 2015 Riviere Galets Vineyard Syrah. Same Vyd. as above. Dark ruby violet. Blackberry nose with less graphite and revealing more subtle Rocks District ferrous stony notes than others and some new oak vanilla. Medium body, medium intense fruit with solid saline-spicy red pepper finish. Very good length and structure with explicit mineral notes. Keep 4- 6 years. 13.8% 17/91 \$45

**Tertulia Cellars:** 2014 The Great Schism GSM; Grenache 65%, Mourvedre 25%, Syrah 10%, Riviere Galets Vyd. Medium ruby to pink rim. Spicy, salami/black pepper, red currant flavors. Medium body. Good fruit, light tannins and nice acidity to finish with ferrous finish, and good length. Pretty classic Rocks District profile. Drink within 3-4 years. 13.8% 17-/90-91 \$45

**The Walls:** 2015 Concrete Mama Syrah; Stoney Vine Vyd. 4.1pH. Concrete fermented, then 6 months aging in 6hl French oak casks and also concrete. Medium ruby. More solid, saline, black berry and lightly porky /salami flavors. A bit low in acid but mineral lift to finish adds some freshness and shows nice graphite notes as well. 14.5% 16+/88 \$70

**The Walls:** 2016 Concrete Mama Grenache; River Rock Vyd, planted 2003? 3.9pH. Medium ruby. Aged all in concrete cubes and egg). Spicy, black cherry, even ferrous aromas Ripe, sweet cherry, spicy flavors with floral raspberry accents. Not too gamy, and just moderate acid. Light tannins. Alcohol heat apparent in finish more than ideal. Still, this has a lot of vibrancy to it. 14.5%16.5/89 \$70

**Two Vintners [Feb 2019 release.]:** 2016 Lola Syrah-Cabernet; Syrah 68%, Cabernet Sauvignon 32%. Yellow Jacket Vyd. 3.6-3.7 pH. All whole cluster fermented. Medium violet ruby. Floral, raspberry, gamy-pork nose with black raspberry fruit accents. Focused, firming tannins. Pointed finish as tannins take a tight hold and coarsen the fruit somewhat. Slightly brusque finish, but intense flavors. Will benefit from further aging in bottle before release, then 4-6 years. 14.6% 16+/88 \$30

**Two Vintners:** 2015 Some Days are Stones Syrah; Stoney Vine Vyd. 4pH. 50-60% whole cluster. Medium ruby. Powerful, bacon, black fruit and graphite nose. Porky/bacon flavors with black pepper accents and definitely hot finish. Overripe, yet solid dense mid-palate fruit and some tannin to resolve. Not my style, but impressive for those who love big, ripe potent wines. Alcohol just gets in the way, and throws the wine out of balance for me. 15.4% 16+/88 \$50

**Watermill Winery:** 2017 Hallowed Stones Cabernet Franc; Watermill Estate (all their vines) planted 2003. Aged in 25% new French and American oak barrels. Solid color. Loire style—gamy, fresh raspberry, vibrant and fresh, fine ferrous finish with soft tannins. Shows definite Rocks District graphite and saline notes as well. Very good for this style. 13.9% 17-/91 \$40

**Watermill Winery:** 2017 Hallowed Stones Syrah/Viognier; Viognier 5%. Medium crimson-ruby. Bright fresh, raspberry bouquet. Soft tannins, fine peppery finish with some gaminess and savory smoked meat notes. Well balanced, oily (higher pH) texture but good acidity and freshness in finish. 13.9% 17-/91 \$40

**Watermill Winery:** 2014 Watermill Estate Tempranillo. Blackish ruby. Some reduction at first in nose. But sweeter, dark plum/licorice cherry flavors with fine tannins shows there is real depth here. Very strong fruit on finish with graphite Rocks District accents make a good case for this grape in the AVA. Needs some aging, perhaps up to 7 years, or a couple of hours aeration to drink now. 13.8% 17/91 \$40

**Watermill Winery:** 2014 Praying Mantis Syrah; Dark ruby. Solid black berry, saline flavors. Good length with fine tannins and ok acid. Lower pH feel in mid-palate than previous wines. Very strong fruit focus; more Northern Rhone structure and density. Good job—for aging 5-7 years. 14.7% 17-/91 \$40

**Watermill Winery:** 2012 Watermill Estate Cabernet Franc; Medium+ ruby, hint garnet. Strong, cassis-graphite berry nose. Palate shows medium body, good acid and decent length. Firm structure and some tannins reveal slightly faded fruit, but the wine still shows a nice hint of 'juice' on finish. Don't hold much longer. 14.6% 17-/91 \$35

**Zerba Estate:** 2015 Zerba Estate Syrah; Winesap Vyd. Medium-dark ruby. 3.7pH?) Rich, spicy black-berry/graphite-gamy nose; more tapenade than most Rocks District syrahs so far (more like Walla Walla Valley). Good acidity, moderately fresh palate feel, with ferrous saline notes to finish. Pretty good weight. 14.7% 16.5-17/89-90 \$36

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