



October, 2018



This month we dig a little deeper into the Columbia Valley, and look at two wines from significant players in that game. The first selection is the **2012 Milbrandt Merlot (\$20)**, which comes from one of the largest growers in the Columbia Valley. In fact, when I searched my hard drive for their name, this vineyard comes up seven times as a source for grapes for other Washington State wineries from previous club and weekly features. This feature will show that while they grow great grapes, they are also pretty good at getting them in the bottle too.

It is hard to imagine now, but the Washington State wine industry is quite young. Yes, there were some vineyards operating in the state as far back as the mid-1800's, but the real catalyst for the industry started in the late 1950's. Then a group of University of Washington professors launched a small operation, today known as Columbia Winery. In the 1960's Chateau St. Michelle was formed, and enlisted the help of the legendary André Tchelistcheff as a consultant. He enthusiastically promoted the potential for Washington State wines and soon wineries were popping up all along the Columbia River. With fantastic sales growth, Chateau St. Michelle's demand for grapes rose just as fast, and soon many field crop farmers started converting some acreage to grape vines.

For anyone who has only spent time in Seattle, you may believe that the climate of Washington is quite wet, and that is true, west of the Cascade Mountains. As you travel east, and the main path is Interstate 90, you cross over the Cascades and end up in a climate best described as high desert. In fact, most of the eastern side of the state receives less than ten inches of rain a year. Most of this region was not considered farmable for most crops until the creation of a system of hydroelectric dams were built on the Columbia River, starting in the late 1930's. With the construction of the dams came a series of man-made lakes, and the ability to easily irrigate the fields on both sides of the river. This is part of the reason that Washington State is the largest supplier in the US for apples, pears, raspberries, and the second largest producer of potatoes. Grapes are only the ninth largest crop in acres of land in Washington, barely edging out lentils. In terms of wine production they are even smaller, as a significant amount of those acres are committed to table grapes.

In addition to the dry climate, this area also counts more than three hundred sunny days per year, which is fifty more than Napa Valley. Not only do they have less cloudy days, but due to their northern latitude, the vineyards in this area receive two hours per day more sunlight than those in Northern California. Because of the Columbia River, and their elevation, most of the vineyards enjoy a wide diurnal temperature swing each day. This means that while the mid-afternoon temperatures are often near one hundred degrees, during the growing season, the evenings cool off as much as fifty degrees. The combination of the dry climate, and long sunny days, with cool nights, stretches the growing season as much as a month longer than Northern California. This results in grapes with thicker skins, more concentration of flavor, and deep color. When you taste the features this month you will see exactly what I mean.

The reason I chose the Milbrandt Merlot for a feature this month is to contrast it with the Chelsea Goldschmidt bottling that was the feature last month. That wine I promoted as a real Cabernet drinkers example, with deep color, moderately high tannins and good concentration. This month I am going to ramp the idea up even more with this bold, obviously tannic example with so much extract that you may feel the need to brush your teeth after drinking. This is the essence of Washington State wines. What they lack in polish and elegance they make up for in power.

Milbrandt Vineyards began in 1987, when Butch and Jerry Milbrandt, fourth generation farmers in the area, converted some of their potato crop over to grapes. At the time theirs was an experimental parcel, which has grown to more than two thousand acres today, divided among twelve different vineyards. The majority of the grapes they grow are sold, but they also produce more than forty-thousand cases of wine under their own label. They recently hired Kendall Mix as their winemaker, who some of you may remember at the helm of Goose Ridge winery, which we featured in this club a couple of years ago.

To make their Merlot they use grapes from their vineyards growing in the Wahluke Slope sub-AVA of the Columbia River Valley. This is one of the warmest growing regions in Washington State, which is why Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot dominate the plantings. For this vintage the wine is 94% Merlot, 5% Malbec and 1% Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine was aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels, as well as tanks, to preserve freshness. When you open this wine, allow it to develop in a decanter for up to an hour before serving. Once you do it delivers a big nose of black cherry preserves, cigar box, vanilla beans, macerated orange peels and plums and dried blackberries. On the palate this wine is big, with a massive wave of fruit framed by firm tannins and a nice lift of acidity. This bad boy weighs in at 15.5% alcohol, so pair with grilled steaks, pot roast or lamb chops.

My second pick this month is from another Washington State winery that is no stranger to a feature at TWM. The **2016 Isenhower Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25)** is part of a new series from Brett and Denise Isenhower, which shows their incredible style of wine at a lower price than their vineyard designated bottlings. Some of you may remember that the Isenhower's were featured in a New York Times article at the beginning of the recession, about how they were coping.

At the time they made the decision to cut their production and only focus on their top tier wines. It was a bold move to cut production and raise prices in those years, but it worked. Now they must be more confident in the future, as they are now producing, again, a series of Columbia Valley wines at a price you can enjoy for more than just special occasions.

Unlike the Milbrandts, who grow their grapes, the Isenhowers own very little in the way of vineyard acreage. They prefer to buy grapes from vineyards with which they have long term agreements, in several different areas of the state. This gives them a little protection from frost and hail, and allows them to use the unique attributes of the growing regions for complexity in their final blends. To make their Columbia Valley Cab they use grapes from three sites, 45% from the Summit View, 32% from Er'tage and 23% from Wallulla vineyards.

For this wine they maintain their standard and the grapes are foot trodded, all punchdowns are done by hand and fermentation occurs with native yeast strains. Brett prefers a minimalist approach to winemaking and allows the wines to age for eleven months in older French barrels with racking only if necessary.

When you are ready to serve this Cabernet, decant it for a half-hour before serving. Then it reveals a more restrained nose, one of fresh cut cedar, dried parsley, cooked blackberries, fresh red cherries, cocoa powder and a bit of the wet slate quality I find defines Washington Cab. On the palate it has good concentration, with the fruit nicely framed by relatively obvious mid-palate tannins and moderate acidity. This is a good Cab for now but will evolve and improve, drinking best from 2020-2025. Serve with a standing rack of pork or slow braised country ribs.

Beef Tenderloin with Dried Fruit and Nut Stuffing

Please don't let the long ingredient list scare you, this recipe is actually quite easy. Make sure to buy a Chateaubriand cut of tenderloin and follow the directions for tying and slicing. The dried fruit accentuates the ripe character of the Milbrandt Merlot and there is plenty of weight in the dish to stand up to either feature wine.

Stuffing

2 teaspoons olive oil
1 large shallot, minced (about 3 tablespoons)
¼ cup chopped prunes
¼ cup dried chopped apricots (unsulfured)
⅔ cup ruby port
½ teaspoon minced fresh thyme leaves
¼ teaspoon table salt
⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

Beef Roast

2 pound beef tenderloin, center-cut, trimmed of fat and silver skin
1 ½ teaspoons kosher salt
1 ½ teaspoons black pepper
2 tablespoons toasted pecans, chopped
3 tablespoons olive oil

Stilton Butter

1 ounce Stilton cheese, crumbled
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
⅛ teaspoon table salt
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley leaves

1. FOR THE STUFFING: Heat oil in medium saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add shallot and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Meanwhile, combine prunes, apricots, and port in microwave-safe bowl; cover with plastic and microwave on high until simmering, about 2 minutes. Set aside until needed.

2. When shallot is softened, add dried fruit/port mixture, thyme, salt, and pepper; continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thick, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove pan from heat and stir in balsamic vinegar. Transfer dried fruit mixture to plate. Set aside and cool to room temperature.

3. FOR THE ROAST: Butterfly the roast by inserting a chef's knife about 1 inch from bottom of roast and cut horizontally, stopping just before edge. Open meat like a book. Make another cut diagonally into thicker portion of roast. Open up this flap, smoothing out butterflied rectangle of meat. Season cut side of roast liberally with salt and pepper. Spread cooled stuffing mixture in an even layer over interior of roast, leaving 1/2-inch border on all sides. Sprinkle pecans in an even layer on top of stuffing. Using both hands, gently but firmly roll up stuffed tenderloin, making it as compact as possible without squeezing out filling. Then evenly space 8 pieces kitchen twine (each about 14 inches) beneath roast. Tie each strand tightly around roast, starting with ends and working in even increments.

In small bowl, stir together 1 tablespoon olive oil, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, and 1 1/2 teaspoons pepper. Rub exterior of roast with oil mixture. Let roast stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

5. Adjust oven rack to middle position; heat oven to 450 degrees. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Add beef to pan and cook until well browned on all sides, 8 to 10 minutes total. Transfer beef to rimmed baking sheet and place in oven. Roast until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of roast registers 120 degrees for rare, 16 to 18 minutes, or 125 degrees for medium-rare, 20 to 22 minutes.

6. FOR THE BUTTER: While meat roasts, stir all ingredients together in a small bowl until combined. Transfer tenderloin to cutting board; spread half of butter evenly over top of roast. Loosely tent roast with foil; let rest for 15 minutes. Slice roast between pieces of twine into thick slices. Remove twine from individual slices and serve with remaining butter passed separately.