

## New Releases from Washington State

By Stephen Tanzer

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At a time when some of Washington's most thoughtful winemakers are considering how they might make ripe, satisfying wines at lower alcohol levels, recent vintages have brought a return to more normal conditions following the 2003-2005 trio of very warm years. In my extensive tastings of Washington wines in Seattle and in Walla Walla Valley at the end of July and in recent weeks back in New York, I sampled 2006 reds from most of the state's best producers, and I'm happy to report that this was a year that benefited from a more leisurely ripening process. There was a single heat spike in August but the weather cooled off at harvest time and growers could generally pick at their leisure, often well into October. The wines show fresher natural acidity than the 2005s, and in many cases more complexity. With healthier pHs, these wines are likely to enjoy a slow and leisurely development in bottle.

Two thousand seven is also quite different in character from recent hot years like 2005 and 2003, and I was particularly impressed by the freshness of the white wines I tasted—not just viogniers but rieslings, sauvignon/semillon blends and even chardonnays. Early evidence is that 2007 is an exceptional vintage for Washington's white wines. But with no burst of heat at the end, it was a challenge to get the cabernet fruit fully ripe in some sites, especially where crop loads were too heavy.

Today, many Washington growers are harvesting smarter: they're picking on flavor profile rather than on Brix levels, waiting for the acids to go down. At the same time, they know they need healthy acidity to make fresh wines, and they would like to rely less on acidification. While growing seasons like '06 and '07 (and probably '08 as well) have been conducive to making wines in this style, there will still remain the longer-term challenge of getting fruit phenolically ripe before grape sugars skyrocket and acidity levels plunge. Hence the constant search for cooler and generally higher-altitude sites with less brutal exposure to the sun, more air movement, and a potentially longer and less extreme growing season.

My annual trip to Washington is always a voyage of discovery, and this year I had the impression of experiencing early releases—and some barrel samples—from more potential future stars than ever before (perhaps not a surprise, as nearly 80 of the state's roughly 540 wineries will release their first crop of wines from vintage 2006). Among emerging wineries of note are such producers as Cadaretta Winery, Efesté, O'Shea Scarborough, Pacific Rim, Trust Cellars, Va Piano and Woodinville Cellars. Add these to the list of producers I named last year—àMaurice Cellars, Chateau Rollat, Brian Carter Cellars, Gramercy Cellars, Mark Ryan Winery and Waters Winery—and wine lovers have a pretty impressive list of new choices. And then there's Corliss Estates, this year's #1 new superstar on the Washington scene, with a bullet.

## Corliss Estates

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### **2003 Corliss Estates Red Wine Columbia Valley**

(\$65; a five-variety Bordeaux blend) Very good deep ruby-red. Sweet, nuanced nose combines currant, plum, cedar, spicy oak and Cuban cigar tobacco. Broad, rich and round, with very ripe flavors of raspberry and currant; comes across as classically dry and yet this displays an almost candied sweetness. Builds impressively on the back end, finishing with lush tannins. Owner Michael Corliss, a long-time wine lover who told me that what he likes best is "10-to-20-year-old Bordeaux," has taken a page out of the Bill Harlan playbook by making numerous vintages before releasing the first wines (vintage 2003) under his name. This is the most exciting new set of Washington State wines I sampled this year. The '03's are scheduled to be released in December.

**92**

### **2003 Corliss Estates Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley**

(\$75; includes 15% merlot and bits of syrah and malbec) Deep ruby. Black cherry candy and licorice on the nose. Broad and sweet but more laid-back than the Red Wine today. A bit backward and aggressive at the moment but boasts excellent cabernet character and firm tannic spine. Cellar this one while enjoying the Red Wine.

**91(+?)**

### **2003 Corliss Estates Syrah Columbia Valley**

(\$55) Good bright deep ruby. Captivating nose melds black raspberry, gunflint, mocha, smoke and roasted nuts. Sweet, lush and superconcentrated, but with a juicy quality serving to intensify the sweet fruit flavors. The wine's rather powerful structure reminded me of a cabernet, but the flavors and inner-mouth aromatic character are pure syrah. Broad but light on its feet, finishing with terrific aromatic persistence and very fine, sweet tannins.

**93**

### **2004 Corliss Estates Red Wine Columbia Valley**

(15% alcohol) Good deep ruby-red. Fruit-driven aromas of cassis and blueberry. Sweet and lush but much less approachable today than the 2003 version, with its dark berry fruit in the background. Finishes with substantial, slightly tough tannins that will call for a good five or six years of cellaring. But then this wine won't be released until the fall of 2009.

**91+**

### **2004 Corliss Estates Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley**

Deep ruby-red. Classic cabernet-dominated aromas of currant, minerals, herbs and pepper. Then gripping and precise in the mouth, with terrific cut and perfume to its berry and mineral flavors. Finishes with firm but fine tannins and superb lingering perfume. A very solidly structured cabernet that should gain in complexity and texture for a decade or two.

**93(+?)**

## **2004 Corliss Estates Syrah Columbia Valley**

Good deep medium red. Aromas of dark berries, cherry, currant leaf and licorice; currently showing more of syrah's pepper than animal side. Then juicy and fruity but quite tight and youthfully uncompromising on the palate, and less obviously sweet than the 2003 syrah. Began with hints of fresh herbs and tree bark but gained fruitiness and a sweet peppery quality as it opened in the glass. Ultimately quite suave but this will need aging.

**92(+?)**

## **2005 Corliss Estates Red Wine Columbia Valley**

(tasted from barrel) Good deep red-ruby. Currant, raspberry and a whiff of tobacco leaf on the nose. Wonderfully sappy and gripping in the mouth, with sharply delineated fruit and a lovely light touch. Finishes very long and spicy, with terrific structure for aging. Classy wine in the making.

**92-94**

## **2005 Corliss Estates Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley**

(from barrel) Good deep ruby-red. Deeply pitched aromas of currant, smoke and tobacco leaf. Broad and ripe but dry, with a suave texture and a deeply sappy quality shown by too few cabernets in Washington. Conveys a light touch and finishes with terrific aromatic persistence. I'm not sure it's longer than the '04 but this is every bit as precise.

**93-95**

## **2005 Corliss Estates Syrah Columbia Valley**

(from tank) Bright medium ruby. Highly complex nose offers sour cherry, smoked meat, tobacco, licorice, black pepper and exotic spices. At once sweet and dry, with superb richness and fat to the flavors of dark berries, pepper and fresh herbs. As broad and full as this is, it also conveys an impression of restraint. Finishes lush, dry and classic.

**92-94**