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>trend watch: **washington state wineries**

washin women & wi



Written by Richard Carroll
Photography by Laura Weston

Exuding an earthy and wondrous magnetism, Washington's female winemakers are teasing wine palates from coast to coast.

gton,

Up north in Washington State in the midst of rolling hills, glimmering lakes, and soft cooling breezes perfumed with the heady bouquet of esteemed and decorated wines, is a spectacular group of highly accomplished women working in a maze of neatly planted vineyards that stretches to the horizon like a magical green silk ribbon.

From Seattle to Spokane, through the Columbia and Yakima Valleys, in one-street towns and along backcountry roads, and in all the nooks and crannies in between, the state has opened its arms to a cluster of brilliant women who have found their calling making

Washington State wine. And along the often steep and winding wine trail, they have won enough prestigious awards to paper most of the state's crusty wine barrels.

Scattered throughout the state like seeds thrown to the wind, these exceptional women have devoted their lives to the art and science of wine-making. As winery proprietors, they have explored new dimensions in the hard science of growing fruit and fermentation, and along the way have come to realize that a glass of fine wine is a delightful gratification that allows fantasies and hard work to become a delectable reality.

Although women are acknowledged throughout the world for many spectacular achievements, head female winemakers are still rarely found anywhere on the planet despite the enormous collection of wineries worldwide. Among conservative French winery owners, it would be an absolute scandal for an American woman to break into the elite, highly privileged and indestructible circle of the good old boys.

Forward thinking Washington State is twisting the norm and has made its mark with some 25 women winemakers and owners already among its 400 wineries. There are more popping up every year, like so many wild flowers — slowly edging their way into a profession typically dominated by men. Let the parade of trendsetters begin!

Opposite page: Kristina Mielke-van Loben Sels, owner of Arbor Crest Wine Cellars in Spokane. Arbor Crest is a beautiful winery offering Kristina's award-winning wines.

Katy Perry, Winemaker/Owner, Grower, Tildio Winery, Manson

It was a dark winter night in the mid-80s. Following a long day at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. where she had been working for six years as a prestigious vertebrate paleontologist focusing on ancient fossils, Katy Perry was suddenly awakened by an insistent voice that swept into the bedroom and whispered, "Go back to the West Coast and make wine!"

Katy says, "It was an incredibly vivid dream, and the demanding voice kept me awake through the night until daybreak... repeating over and over, 'Go Make Wine.' For me, a Smithsonian scientist with a degree in Geology where everything has to be backed with documentation, I was overwhelmed, and I didn't know how to do this — 'go make wine.' I liked wine but was clueless. I would go to the liquor store in D.C. and tell them what I was having for dinner and ask which wine would be appropriate.

"My vineyard has to prove itself," she says, "I have to make wines that excite me. Pinot Noir is an intriguing variety. It demands more attention at harvest and is not a sweetheart wine, but can be so wonderful. I planted the entire vineyard, and strangely at harvest I don't want to give up the fruit, which is so gorgeous, ripe and plump, with an indescribable aroma. It's like an old reliable friend who is going to move away, but then here comes the beginning of a new vintage."

In her wildest dreams during the night Katy spent listening to that compelling voice, she could not have envisioned owning her own winery, creating fine wines served in Seattle restaurants, being a member of the Board of Directors of the Columbia Cascade Winery Association, and representing Tildio Winery at wine industry events throughout the year. Yet out of her passion, courage, and hard work, she has made her mark.

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The voice propelled me into a prying curiosity. What is the lifestyle of a winemaker, and someone working in wine? I gave my notice to the Smithsonian, and then couldn't even find Napa on the map, and actually ended up in Sacramento."

Katy finally found the right road to Napa, and the next day stopped and talked to an optimistic farmer working in a vineyard. "The farmer told me that every day was something different, that it was definitely a great lifestyle, that folks are open and sharing, and help each other out...[it was] a real community."

Laughing, she says, "An idea came to me from the bottom of an empty wine bottle — apply for a Wine Spectator Student Scholarship at UC Davis, and shockingly I got it!" Katy started as a Superior Senior, and after three impassioned years graduated with degrees in Enology and Viticulture. With her intense research background at the Smithsonian, she was an ideal fit for the wine world and as an apostle of the grape, did research for Robert Mondavi and worked as a Research Viticulturist for other top wineries. But her burning desire was to control both the vineyard operation and winemaking, and to answer only to herself.

A native of Washington State, she and her husband Milum purchased an eight-acre, sloped vineyard property in central Washington overlooking Wapato and Roses Lake in a tranquil valley near natural, glacier-fed Lake Chelan in 2000. Here they designed Tildio Winery from the ground up.





Heather Neff-White, Winemaker/Co-owner, Nefarious Cellars, Lake Chelan

Heather Neff-White, talented and accomplished, and looking like she just walked off a *travelgirl* cover photo shoot, describes her scenario, "A couple of reds, a couple of whites — just a chick, a guy, and a dog striving to blow your mind. Take a drive through our vineyard, climb the tiny slope, you'll like what you find at the top, and love what you try at Nefarious Cellars."

Heather explains that Nefarious, (meaning, "to be wicked"), is a play on last names and the fact that she does create wickedly good wines. "Wine has always been something romantic for me. I love white wine, my husband, Dean Neff, is a red wine aficionado. It was never my intention to work for someone else. It all began when we planted a one-acre vineyard in 1998, filled with eight varieties, so that I could get a sense of what would work."

Heather's philosophy? "Cocktail wines are a dime a dozen, often flabby and high in alcohol. You might as well go climb in the barrel. I feel oak can be a masking factor. I use stainless steel. There are so many wines out there, and I'm taking a big risk because I'm making wines that I like, that fit into our personalities, and that agree with the Lake Chelan killer soil, such as Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier. Creating a fine bottle of wine is my life — along with my family."

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Kathy Charlton, Owner/Manager, Olympic Cellars Winery, Port Angeles

The fabled Olympic Peninsula is a cherished national treasure — and it was just the right setting for creative women on a mission led by spirited Kathy Charlton when they opened the glamorous and captivating Olympic Cellars Winery — a.k.a. the Working Girl Boutique Winery — in 2001, the first of its kind on the Peninsula.

We found the Working Girls themselves, Kathy Charlton, Sara Gagnon, and Molly Rivard — each with enough personal charisma and allure to dominate a room from a footstool — in an enchantingly restored 1890 barn, the oldest in Clallam County, on State Highway 101 between Port Angeles and Sequim. Their dynamic women-owned and operated winery has made its mark with the highly acclaimed La Dolce Vida labels and the Working Girl Wine labels, which include Rosé the Riveter, Working Girl White and Go Girl Red. As for La Dolce Vida, these women — and their wines — express that phrase “Live the Sweet Life” with absolute style and immense pleasure. A fourth member of this vineyard vixen squad, Libby Sweetser, recently joined the team and the “girl power” continues.

Bubbly Kathy Charlton, who acts as if she has never experienced a bad day and has more energy than a humming bird on a honeysuckle high, explains, “The Working Girl series is a salute to working women everywhere, but we were repeatedly told by men in the tasting room that they can’t quite bring themselves to order Go Girl Red in a bar. So we created a fourth wine in the series, Handyman Red, named for our only rooster in the hen house, Benoit Murat. Benoit (from Toulouse, France) is our only male winemaker at Olympic Cellars. Handyman Red was released in early 2005 for all those guys who love Working Girl Wines but can’t quite bring themselves to order Go Girl Red in a bar.”

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Kathy says, “In the beginning we talked about having a fun label, and we were three working girls. The label was founded on love, not a marketing ploy to sell wine. We first had to put good juice in the bottles. We love blends, and we have won a number of awards including some in a San Francisco competition, but we are women doing what we know best, and it’s not just about the wine and the medals; it’s the power to turn a gunny sack into a piece of velvet.”

She continues, “We’re about women who take the time out to live, and to find those moments to hold hands, and to enjoy events that celebrate family, women and life. Our local charity of choice is the Gynocare Program, for low-income women on the Olympic Peninsula who are at risk for ovarian cancer, and other illnesses not covered by government funding.” With such life-sustaining stamina and heartfelt compassion, it’s easy to see why Rosie the Riveter’s “We Can Do It Too” motto has become their mantra, and it’s easy to believe that they can — and will — do it too!

Virginie Bourgue, Winemaker, Bergevin Lane Vineyard, Walla Walla

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at Bergevin Lane.

"We're about three women, all managing partners, running Bergevin Lane," says Virginie Bourgue, who was raised in Provence, France, and earned a Masters in Enology at the University of Rheims. Following an intense desire to make wine, she traveled to Washington in 2002 and interned at Chateau Ste. Michelle Winery. During a holiday barrel tasting in Walla Walla, by a marvelous stroke of luck, Virginie met Annette Bergevin, her father Gary Bergevin, and Amber Lane, a partner. Sparks flew and the day before Virginie was preparing to return to France, she was offered the position of Head Winemaker at Bergevin Lane.

"It was destiny at its best, someone was looking after me," explains Virginie.

"Winemaking is a perfect fit for me. Though I was more involved in white wine and worked extensively in the champagne region of France, most of my production here is with reds. We source from various vineyards in the Walla Walla and Columbia Valley appellations. I have no guidelines for aging wine other than 'listening' to what the wine has to say. Wine is a challenge, but with Annette and Amber running the show we have a winning team."

So much for that return ticket — France's loss was Washington State's gain.

Below: Virginie Bourgue, winemaker, pictured with Amber Lane (in cowboy hat), one of the co-owners of Bergevin Lane.





Liz Stepniewski, Winemaker/Owner, Windy Point Vineyards, Wapato

High on a bluff overlooking the Yakima Valley, surrounded by orchards, vineyards and honey-thick sunlight, winemaker Liz Stepniewski and her farmer husband, Mike, are producing estate-grown wine at their gorgeous Windy Point Vineyards.

"Mike's family has owned the farm since 1972. We have about 350 acres raising apples, pears and cherries," Liz explains. "We planted our first grapes in 1999. Mike loves red wine, and he's thinking we can do a better job than Gallo. I was nursing our second child at the time and Mike said, 'We can't afford to hire a winemaker so why don't you do it?' I have two children, laundry, and meals to prepare. I never ever thought of myself as a winemaker. I went to the Encyclopedia Britannica and read an article on wine, then began to participate with winemakers in the area. It was really scary. I thought of wine as going to the store and taking it off the shelf."

The beginning was rough. "I learned a lot that first year, but it was a nightmare. After a 14-hour day I would lie in bed and think, 'I just ruined the Zinfandel.' It was so awful,

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I've blanked out the first year. We have no outside financing and the fear of not being successful was overpowering. The idea that you build a winery and people will come is not true because there are a ton of wineries. The people that came were investigational, but slowly they did begin to arrive."

"It takes nine months to produce a child, and it took eight months for them to approve a sign near the freeway. In the beginning we thought it would take forever to sell out our first vintage. I'm looking for balance at the dinner table, wines that complement food and age well."

Looking forward from the Encyclopedia quick study, Liz's boutique wines have won a number of impressive awards including the Peoples' Choice in Seattle — and her vintages do sell out.

Monica Meglasson, Winemaker, CEO, Caterina Winery, Spokane

Flamboyant Monica Meglasson, inspired by art and color and the joy of music and cuisine, brings new energy and vigor to Spokane. Born to be a winemaker, at age 10 she tried to make some Strawberry Boone in her closet, and in a strawberry rage the jar exploded. Fascinated with the world, at age 15 she wrote a paper on Italy and wine, and later moved there to be a winemaker. Give her a blank canvas and she will create something Italian.

After training at UC Davis in 2002, she became the winemaker at Caterina, a boutique winery located in an old brick building with a ghost, adjacent to Riverfront Park in the heart of Spokane. "I love to make Italian-influenced wines that are artistic, untraditional, affordable blends, showcasing Washington's grapes working with varietals such as Sangiovese and Pinot Grigio. I'm a great cook but I think about the wine I want to have, and then prepare the food, even when I go to a restaurant."

Monica's winery is earthy and bohemian, a cozy bistro with a wine cellar ambiance. The happening winery is bursting with rotating art shows and colorful paintings that cover the walls and candlelit tables. On weekends, live music and appetizer specials are offered in the tasting hall and the garden patio. Laughing, Monica says, "And just in case you thought only men make wine, here I am."

One trip through the wine routes of Washington State will make a believer out of any oenophile.

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Jo Brodzinski, Owner/Winemaker, Seth Ryan Winery, Benton City

Meeting gregarious Jo Brodzinski is a magical encounter with a Washington icon. With more degrees than a Harvard professor, and an industry impact that includes President of both the Columbia and Yakima Valley Winery Associations, Jo's winery is a family affair, nestled in the Red Mountain Appellation in the southeastern end of the Yakima Valley.

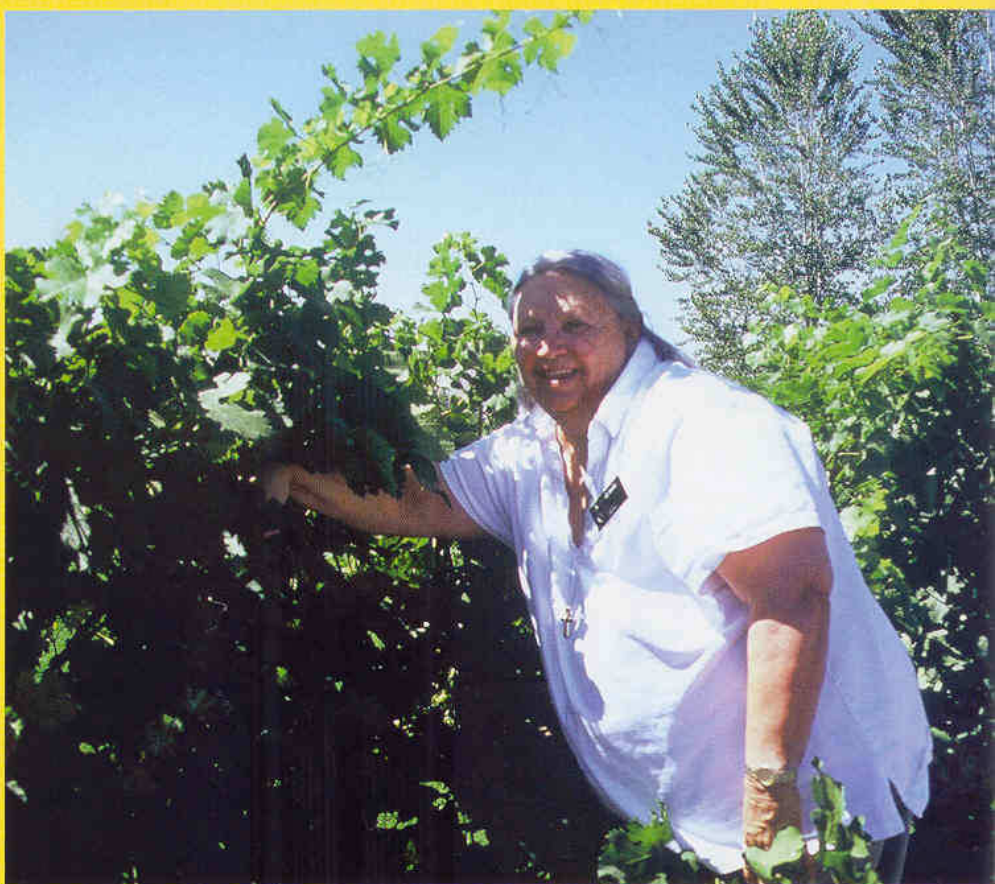
"If anyone would have told me I was to become a farmer and listen to the grapes and feel the air, I might have laughed. Back in the 1980s I made 500 gallons of Riesling in a garage and poured it down the drain, but later when we won our first award we celebrated, and toasted the Riesling gone bad," Jo says.

"I'm 68 years old, and spend 15 hours a day here. I make our wines big and bold, and long lasting. The fun and passion is when you get your hands on the grapes at crush and maintain that goodness all the way to wine. Wine makes itself, so you have to work with care and pay attention to the little things."

Her biggest challenge? "Our guests' fickle approach to wine tasting. People come in a little hesitant. I always try to educate and teach in the tasting room. One of my favorite Joisms: 'We have to demystify the arrogance of wine. The only good wine is the wine you like.'"

Now that's an approach we love.

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and pay attention to
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One trip through the wine routes of Washington State will make a believer out of any oenophile.

washington wine 411

Tildio Winery

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Olympic Cellars/Working Girl Winery

www.olympiccellars.com 360-452-0160
255410 Highway 101, Port Angeles, WA 98362

Nefarious Cellars

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4955 Lakeshore Road, Chelan, WA 98816

Bergevin Lane Vineyard

www.bergevinlane.com 509-526-4300
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Windy Point Vineyards

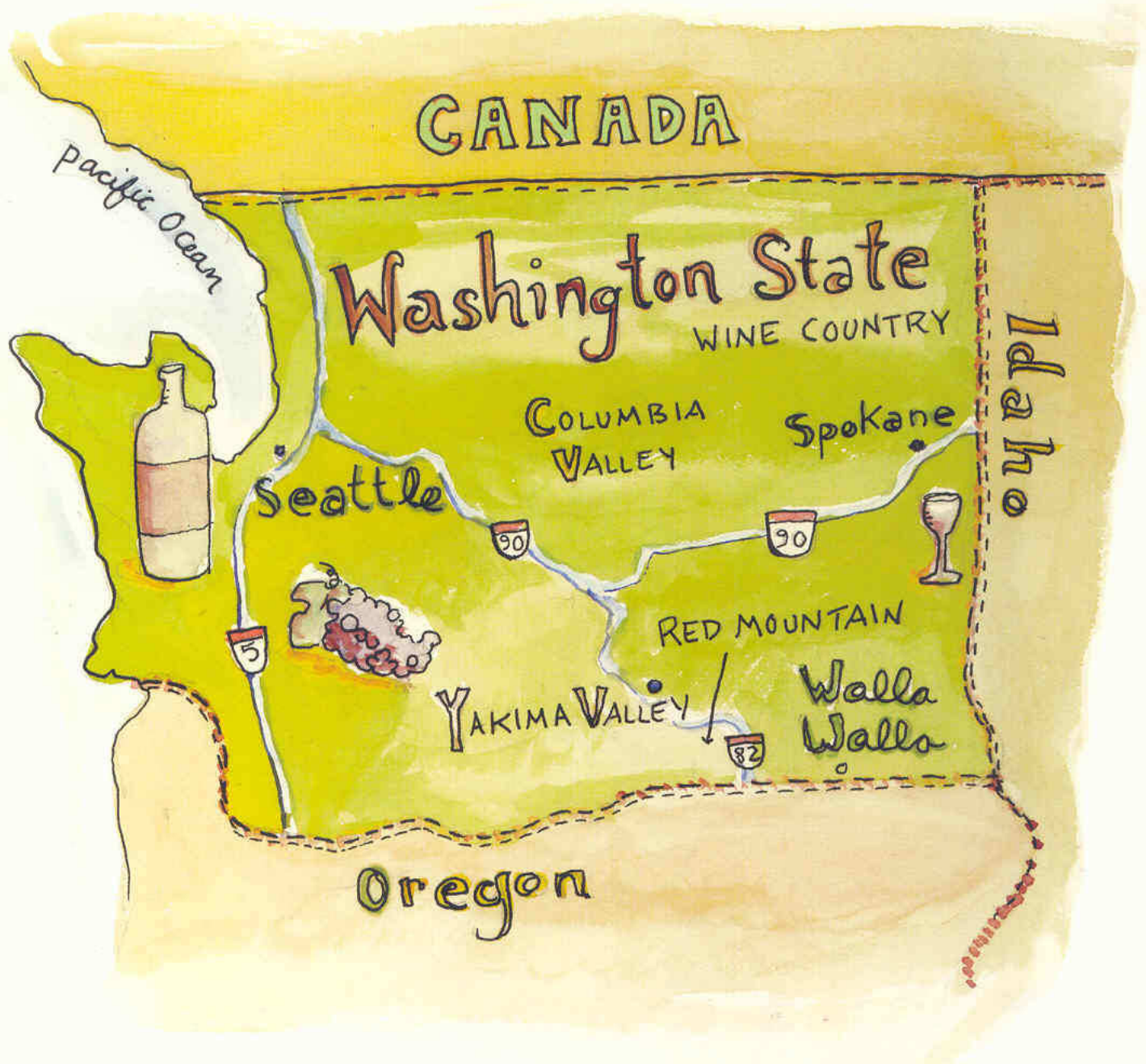
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