

Washington's outstanding Champoux vineyard

31 Mar 2010 by Julia Harding MW

The highlight of the [Pacific North West tasting](#) in London earlier this year was a clutch of very fine Cabernet Sauvignons from Champoux vineyard in Washington state. They reinforced my impression from the rest of the tasting that Cabernet can be a real star among the state's reds, particularly when the vines are more mature, the site just right and the vineyard manager a perfectionist. First some background, then the tasting notes.

Washington has 14,570 ha (36,000 acres) of vineyards, 90% in production. There are 11 AVAs and more than 650 wineries. This seminar – with a live link to the slightly bleary-eyed winemakers in Seattle (poor things, it was about 6 am their time) – zoomed in on a single vineyard within the Horse Heaven Hills appellation (the highlighted area near the bottom of the map) to show how six wines from six different producers reveal the characteristics of this now well-established and cherished vineyard: Champoux.

Horse Heaven Hills AVA, officially designated in 2005, has a vineyard area of 3,600 ha (8,900 acres). In terms of tonnage of grapes harvested, the varietal composition is 33% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 14% Chardonnay, 9% Riesling and 7% Syrah - a much higher proportion of red grapes than for the state overall (19.7% Riesling, 19.3% Chardonnay, 18% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17.5% Merlot, 7.4% Syrah, plus lesser amounts of other varieties such as Malbec, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, Tempranillo, etc.)

Champoux vineyard, like many others in the wine regions of North America, is not a monopole but is cultivated for several producers by Paul Champoux, vineyard manager since 1989. The vineyard was set up in 1972 by Don and Linda Mercer. Paul and his wife Judy leased the land from 1993 to 1996 and in 1997, in partnership with four of their clients - Andrew Will, Powers, Quilceda Creek and Woodward Canyon - they bought the vineyard. The grapes are sold to more than 25 different customers.

The 73-hectare vineyard, which is in several parcels, is 5 miles north of the Columbia River at an elevation of 215 to 170 metres (700 to 550 feet) on sandy loam soils with a sunny, dry, warm and windy climate. It's pretty much on the same latitude as the northern Rhône. One main parcel (see diagram) is circular due to the use of pivot irrigation, though they are now moving to drip systems. More recent plantings are more densely planted than the original. Cabernet Sauvignon is king here, though there's now also Riesling and other varieties, all on their own roots.

Average yields are a respectable 50 hl/ha (3 tons/acre) and this level gives better all-round ripeness over the long slow ripening period than lower yields. Natural acidity levels are very good so they don't need to acidify.

The producers were all clearly very proud of Paul Champoux (pictured here with his wife and vineyard partner Judy), describing him as 'a good farmer', one who is in the vineyard every day and whose advice is not to be ignored! 'Paul has aged beautifully like his vines'. The six wines were an impressive demonstration of the quality of the fruit from Champoux vineyard. Although each one had its own expression of the site, what linked them most obviously was the quality and character of the tannin: extremely fine, dark and elegant. Together with the naturally well-balanced acidity, they create a wonderful framework for the rich, dark, blessedly not-overripe fruit; powerful wines that are nevertheless models of restraint.



The wines are listed in the order tasted, all but the first are predominantly or exclusively Cabernet Sauvignon. I have suggested much longer drinking windows than I might normally have done because of the producers' tales of older vintages that are still drinking beautifully. With this combination of freshness, elegance and lovely fruit, I am not surprised by their longevity, though they will also give great pleasure long before they reach their dotage. All the wines were around 14.5% but the alcohol was not at all intrusive.

Andrew Will, Champoux Vineyard 2007 Horse Heaven Hills 17.5 Drink 2012-2018

52% Cabernet Franc, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon plus Merlot and a little Petit Verdot. Very deeply coloured, black core. Dark and tucked in. Very rich, dark, sweet black fruit, including some ripe damson. Some milk chocolate sweetness. Firm, lush dry tannins. Dark and savoury but so fine and yet very ripe without any overripeness. Drier on the finish than some. Very fine grained but quite a grip on the finish. The youngest of the flight and needs more time. (JH)

Fidelitas, Champoux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 Horse Heaven Hills 18 Drink 2011-2022

French and US oak, 50% new. Black core. Dark but perfumed cassis nose. Marked oak spice and mocha at the moment. Great purity and restraint. Fluid, dry, very fine grained. At the moment it's more about texture than flavour. But there's juicy dark berries on the palate too. Balanced and intense and so fine though the intensity gives a slight bitterness on the finish but not in a negative way. (JH)

Januik, Champoux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 Horse Heaven Hills 18 Drink 2011-2022

Black core. Touch of oak char and maybe a hint of smoky reduction, which is attractive and promising. Even darker, fine fine tannins. Such restraint even with a gresat density of dark fruit. Silky and supple and still has that lovely dark modesty and intensity. (JH)

Powers, Champoux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon
2006 Horse Heaven Hills 18 Drink 2011-2020

Includes 2% Petit Verdot. Refined but intense dark-fruited nose. More red fruit as it opens up. A little cedary, cigar box and sweet spice. Firm and dense but smooth and supple too. Very long finish that is fluid and dark and spiced. Densely supple. (JH)

Quilceda Creek, Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 Horse Heaven Hills 18 Drink 2011-2025

Small berries and a tannic vintage. Small percentage of Merlot and Cabernet Franc. 88% Champoux and 12% from Red Mountain vineyards. 22 months in new French oak. Both red and dark fruit on the nose. Such restraint even though you know this has great fruit depth. Smooth, deep-pile velvety tannins. Thick but not heavy. Savoury and very dry but in no way drying. Firm seude-like tannins and these tannins are perfectly enhanced by the acidity. (JH)

Woodward Canyon, Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 Horse Heaven Hills 17.5 Drink 2005-2020

2000 was warmish for WA but cooler than 2003 and 2005. Small open tanks punched down. New French oak. Fresh, cedary, fragrant of sweet forest floor but not yet gamey or meaty. Very slight note of liquorice and furniture polish but still marked by pure cassis. Still so very very youthful. Dense and still firm but full of life. Very slightly herbaceous on the finish. A food wine. (JH)