

SEVEN HILLS

[WALLA WALLA, WASHINGTON]



On my first visit to Seven Hills Vineyard, Norm McKibben, the vineyard's principal owner, took me up to his reviewing stand. From an elevation of eight hundred feet, we looked down on the rows of vines. This was it: merlot country, a thing you'd have a hard time saying about any other place on earth, outside of Pomerol. Of the twelve best U.S. merlots we tasted last year, four of them drew fruit from this vineyard. McKibben's client list reads like a who's who of Washington greats: Leonetti, Andrew Will, L'Ecole No. 41, Woodward Canyon, Tamarack, and of course his own winery, Pepper Bridge.

We were eyeing a low sweeping bank of clouds to the west, gray-blue and swollen with the kind of heavy precipitation this region wasn't supposed to get. The air was close, the wind a steady blow, not hard, but with the persistence of a rotary fan — the kind of fan with no 'off' switch.

"I thought it wasn't supposed to rain around here," I said.

McKibben shook his head no.

"So, I might see your annual rainfall come down on this one afternoon?" I said.

He said I might.

The rain fell in sheets, but it fell well north and east of where we were standing. Seven Hills Vineyard typically gets seven or eight inches of annual rain, but six miles away, that number grows to 20. Instead of water, the site has wind in abundance. For proof of this, you need only walk up to the top of the hill and look south into Oregon (the vineyard is, in fact, in Oregon, five miles south of the state line). There you'll find the world's largest wind farm, over four hundred windmills animating the hilltops.

Twelve thousand years ago, however, it was water reworking the land. That's when a flood of Biblical proportions roared across eastern Washington, rendering the Walla Walla Valley an enormous mineral-laden lake — and it did this dozens of times. In the pasturelands just west of town are small canyons whose walls reveal the striation of sediment, as regular and uniform as the stripes on a seersucker jacket.

Something about that lake sediment seems to render the Walla Walla Valley's wine distinct from others in the vast Columbia Valley, and that flavor profile is epitomized in Seven Hills Vineyard. The wines, especially the merlot, have a vivid red fruit character, usually

accented by an earthy note, an organic flavor that recalls anything from sun-dried tomatoes to air-dried beef in a soy glaze. But no one can really say what causes this, exactly. Indeed, the top soils are almost uniformly wind-blown loess, a fine and light soil type so low in clay content that Marty Clubb of L'Ecole No. 41 likens it to tiny, BB-like pellets. It capably drains what little moisture these plants can find (Seven Hills is irrigated, as is every vineyard in Eastern Washington).

Seven Hills is on the southern bank of that ancient lake. Much of the original vineyard was planted in 1981 and the age of the vines may account for some of the generous, textural heft you can find in these wines. The vineyard slopes north, an orientation that Chris Figgins of Leonetti Cellar says helps to mitigate some of the intense heat of the growing season.

Certainly Seven Hills benefits from Washington's extended hours of summer sun, but vineyard manager Chris Banak thinks that the entire weather cycle contributes to the vine's physiological expression. "Winters are so harsh here," he says (so harsh last winter that hundreds of vines were killed off in the lower elevations). "It changes the dynamics of the vine — they go through a much deeper dormancy." Shaking off the winter, vines here bloom a full month later than those in Napa, but they catch up rapidly in the long summer days. Then the light trails off dramatically after September 1; grapes hang well into the fall, without the benefit of much photosynthetic activity.

The confluence of all these character-building elements shows in the best Seven Hills cabernets and merlots. Marty Clubb offers one interpretation of the site in his 2001 L'Ecole No. 41 Seven Hills Merlot, with a spicy red character and a hint of cinnamon to line the glowing red cherry fruit. Casey McClellan's 2001 Seven Hills Reserve displays earth in abundance, with aromas of sun-dried tomatoes and a fruit character that reminded me of plums in soy sauce. Five Star Cellars' 2001 Seven Hills Cabernet shows off the site's minerality; Josh Greene likened the aroma to metal-tinged air, like stepping into a silver mine. It too has that earthy note, this time expressed as beef tea, informing its silky red fruit.

Perhaps the most complete expression came from Chris Camarda, in his Andrew Will 2000 Seven Hills Cabernet. It exhibits all of the beefy, leafy elements of the site in layers, with a clean red fruit expression that seems as pristine and clear as a cloudless sky. ■