

Wine Spectator invites Idaho wine to Vinexpo tasting

By Eric Degerman, May 29, 2015

NAMPA, Idaho — It's rare air for a Snake River Valley wine to generate buzz beyond the borders of Idaho, but Sawtooth Estate Winery winemaker Meredith Smith will see her best Syrah poured next month at the world's most influential convention: Vinexpo in Bordeaux.

"Idaho has never been to Vinexpo, so that in and of itself is a big deal," Smith said. "There are other great winemakers here in Idaho whose wines deserved to be represented as well. I just got lucky."

The Pacific Northwest will have three wines represented as part of Wine Spectator magazine's Global Connections tasting June 15 at Vinexpo. Joining the Sawtooth 2012 Trout Trilogy Syrah (\$35) will be two from Ste. Michelle Wine Estates — Col Solare as well as the Chateau Ste. Michelle & Dr. Loosen Eroica Riesling.

Wineries invited to pour at that tasting must have an international winery. For Seattle-based Precept Wine, the partner winery is Shingleback in Australia.



Meredith Smith is the head winemaker at Sawtooth Winery near Nampa, Idaho. (Photo courtesy of Precept Wine)

"Vinexpo's recognition of the

United States as its first-ever Country of Honor is very exciting, and it inspired us to host this special tasting," Marvin R. Shanken, Wine Spectator editor and publisher, stated in a news release. "With the U.S. being No. 1 in wine consumption, we also felt now was the opportune time to host this event. We look forward to showcasing all these impressive, internationally driven wineries."

Baseler, Gore to represent Ste. Michelle at 5-day expo

Ste. Michelle's partner for Col Solare is Antica, owned by the iconic Antinori family of Tuscany. The Eroica Riesling connection is famed German producer Ernst Loosen. Ste. Michelle CEO Ted Baseler and Doug Gore, Ste. Michelle's executive vice president for winemaking, viticulture and operations, will meet Loosen at Vinexpo. Smith will see Precept CEO Andrew Browne on the floor of Vinexpo.

"I really don't know what to expect," Smith said. "I don't know anybody."

Vinexpo brings together an expected 50,000 representatives of the wine and spirits industries from more than 120 countries for more than 90 events, tastings and seminars from June 14-18.

"For my wine to go in front of Vinexpo and the world and the critics with excellent palates who will be there, it's a great opportunity," she said. "It's beyond what I can fathom, actually."

Precept, Spectator collaborate on Sawtooth selection



Heidi Witherspoon, director of communications for Precept, told Great Northwest Wine that Precept's winemaking team collaborated on its nominations, but it received a suggestion from Wine Spectator.

"This was tough for a place like the Snake River Valley, where its potential is still being realized and it has so many promising varieties such as Riesling, Chardonnay, Tempranillo, Syrah and Malbec," Witherspoon said via email. "In narrowing the picks, Meredith Smith convened with Bill Murray (director of Idaho winemaking and former Sawtooth winemaker), brought her top picks to the Seattle office for an internal tasting, and from there we sent the wines to Harvey Steiman for scoring.

"Because scores are still pending and we needed to make a selection to send to France, Mr. Steiman could only advise us to consider which variety the team felt best represented the region since that was the mission of the magazine's VinExpo tasting, so we went with the 2012 Trout Trilogy Syrah."

Witherspoon pointed out Syrah has been the variety that's generated most of Idaho's highest scores with 90-point wines from Cinder Wines, Colter's Creek and Koenig Vineyards.

Smith said she believes her 2012 Trout Trilogy Syrah — from Sawtooth's reserve tier — will find an interested and appreciative audience at Vinexpo.

"I think the Syrahs here in Idaho tend to be more similar to the Rhône style," she said. "The California Syrahs, for me, are a lot of dark fruit characteristics and the Washington Syrahs are not quite as heavy, but then when you get to Idaho Syrahs, you get into the volcanic soils and Lake Idaho beds, which makes for a more earthy, savory, smoky style of Syrah. That's natural for us in the Snake River Valley. We don't get the dark, dark blackberry that California and Washington get."

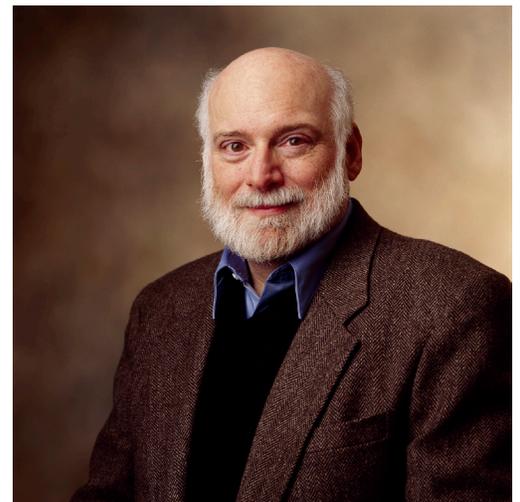
Smith said the Snake River Valley Syrahs also check in at 13.5 percent alcohol, which also should resonate in Europe.

Sawtooth dominated at 2014 Idaho Wine Competition

It's uncommon for Sawtooth's reserve wines to be sent off for reviews and entered in competition. "I typically don't get to have my reserves leave for anything other than tasting room sales that much," she said. "It's not every day that happens."

When they do, the results often are there.

Last year, Smith amassed five gold medals at the Idaho Wine Competition, and two of them for work with Rhône grapes — the 2011 Trout Trilogy Petite Sirah and 2013 Classic Fly Series Cinsault Rosé. She also grabbed a gold for the Sawtooth 2012 Classic Fly Series Tempranillo (\$25), and Smith admits



Harvey Steiman is editor at large for Wine Spectator with a focus on Washington, Oregon and Idaho.



she wondered if submitting her version of the Spanish red would make more a statement for herself and Idaho.

There's no time to look back. As soon as she returns to the Snake River Valley, she'll be busy bottling her reserves from 2013.

"I used the same yeast for the '13 Syrah that I did in trials with the '12, and the 2013 Syrah is just as beautiful. It just keeps going," she said. "And I'll have 300 to 400 cases of it, too."

The 2011 vintage marked her first at Sawtooth, where she learned winemaking on the job from Murray. Precept moved him to Walla Walla to take over at Canoe Ridge Vineyard, but Smith said she still calls her mentor "almost everyday."

Smith, promoted from associated winemaker to head winemaker in 2014, will use the Vinexpo experience to spend six days in Burgundy. Her tours will include visits at such wineries at Domaine Arlaud, Maison Joseph Drouhin, Maison Louis Jadot and Frédéric Magnien.

"All these wineries responded to my request for a tour," Smith said. "I couldn't believe it."

She's keen to learn more about biodynamic farming and trek into an old growth oak forest at the invitation of a cooper. Language won't be a major barrier as she'll have a chance to use the French she's been studying off and on since before she graduated from Boise High in 1986. She's looking forward to cycling around countryside near Beaune, Beouf Bourguignon and world-famous cheese.

"I've been told that it's going to be hard coming back home after eating the food there," she said. "And I love those wines over there. I love how they make them in a more natural way and how the focus is on the vineyard. And in the 2015 vintage, I'm going to experiment with some Burgundian yeast."



Dale Jeffers, vineyard manager for Winemakers LLC, marvels at the cinder soils of Sawtooth Vineyard. (Photo by Eric Degerman/Great Northwest Wine)

