

# Dunne on Wine: Gems from Idaho

By Mike Dunne, January 19, 2016

Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog should have been at our table rather than the one they shared in the original “Muppet Movie.” They would have learned that Idaho wine comes in bottles topped with corks rather than caps, costs more than 95 cents, and is far more varied and refined than the sparkling muscatel – “one of the finest wines of Idaho” – poured, tasted and spat out by their contemptuous waiter, played by Steve Martin.

But that was 1979, when Idaho’s nascent wine industry maybe warranted Martin’s smarmy condescension.

If the Muppets had joined us during the Idaho Wine Competition this past fall, they would have seen just how modern, diverse and assured the state’s wines have become over the past four decades, a point I made in a column last summer.

Our four-person panel judged 89 of the 160 entries. We awarded quite a few gold medals. And we learned that while fine wine isn’t as closely identified with Idaho as potatoes, it is rising in reliability and esteem.

All major awards went to wines from Snake River Valley in the state’s southwest corner, one huge American Viticultural Area, curving in a massive crescent from Twin Falls north to McCall, with Boise its commercial hub and most convenient starting point for a tour of the region. (For skiing wine enthusiasts, Boise is about a four-hour drive from Sun Valley.)

The sunny and gently undulating Snake River Valley is an agricultural cornucopia, yielding, among other crops, onions, apples, cherries, cattle, plums and goats. One local grape-growing and winemaking couple, Ron and Mary Bitner, even maintains 35 acres of young oak and hazelnut trees inoculated with truffle spores. Deer in the region have their pick of so many fruits that farmers don’t need to build fences to keep them out of vineyards.

Snake River Valley has been a federally designated viticultural area only since 2007, though the first wine grapes were planted in the area in 1970. Growth of the wine trade in Snake River Valley since then has been slow, though it looks to be accelerating. From eight wineries and brands in 1995, the total now stands at around 55.



*Riesling from Idaho? That’s what it is, arriving on the crush pad at Ste. Chapelle, Idaho’s oldest and largest winery. Mike Dunne*



*Sign post in Idaho’s Snake River Valley giving directions and distances to some of the area’s wineries. Mike Dunne*



*Vineyard workers hoeing weeds in Idaho’s Snake River Valley. Mike Dunne*





*Idaho's Snake River Valley is home to around 55 wineries, up from eight wineries and brands in 1995.  
Mike Dunne*

Most wineries are small and family-owned, with sales largely direct from their tasting rooms or in local shops and restaurants. The oldest, biggest and most corporate – with the broadest distribution – is Ste. Chapelle, established as a brand in 1976; its distinctive octagon-shaped winery opened three years later.

While growth in the number of wineries in the appellation has picked up, winemakers say that the cultivation of new vineyards is lagging behind demand, compelling them to look principally to Washington and Oregon for additional grapes.

Because of the youth of the region, a prevailing ethic of experimentation among farmers and winemakers, and a terrain marked by divergent elevations, exposures and soils, grape growers pretty much have their pick of what varieties to plant, with a couple of exceptions, most notably pinot noir, which hasn't performed well in Idaho. (Just one was in the competition, and it didn't win a medal.)

Based on wines our panel tasted, if I were a farmer I'd be sticking in the ground tempranillo and riesling, varieties traditionally identified with two very different growing areas (Spain for the former, Germany for the latter) but which seem to do exceptionally well alongside each other in Snake River Valley.

We tasted four tempranillos, awarding three gold medals, one of them a rare double-gold, meaning all four judges agreed that it deserved the high honor. It was the elegant Vizcaya Winery 2011 Snake River Valley Tempranillo (\$29), which despite its relatively low alcohol (12.7 percent) danced with suggestions of pomegranates and cherries and was remarkably lively for its zesty acidity. Overall, the Idaho tempranillos showed a character, balance and verve that I've only rarely found in the varietal from California.

Of the 10 rieslings we judged, five won gold medals, including a relatively old entry that nevertheless was exceptionally vivacious, minerally and complex – the Cold Springs Winery 2009 Snake River Valley “Phren/ology” Riesling (\$10). For best of class, however, it was edged by the Bitner Vineyards 2013 Snake River Valley Riesling (\$17), a richer, fatter, creamier and sweeter take on the varietal.

As with vintners just about everywhere, Idaho's winemakers look to noble cabernet sauvignon to establish their credentials, but perhaps they should be devoting their energies to another variety, at least by the experience of our panel. Of the 14 entries, not a single one was judged worthy of a gold medal. There were a couple of decent candidates in the batch, but as a group they struggled to say



cabernet sauvignon, coming off with too much oak, too much stalkiness and too little characteristic fruit.

Their showing was a mystery, only complicated later when I hung around the valley a couple of days and tasted several older cabernets that were outstanding for their focus, energy and representation of the varietal, especially a lean and long 1995 and an exceptionally floral and plush 2007, both by Bitner Vineyards.

During those excursions I also was impressed by syrahs I sampled, in particular the bacon-y and spirited 2012 and 2013 versions of Trout Trilogy made by Meredith Smith of Sawtooth Winery, and the bright, vibrant and silken 2004 by Greg Koenig of Koenig Winery. Later, when Koenig was asked which variety would be most identified with Idaho in 20 years, he said, "Syrah. It's been a revelation to us all here. The wines are rich, extracted and varietally correct."

And Idaho grape growers just may want to expand their muscat plantings. The best-of-show wine at the competition went to the Hat Ranch Winery 2014 Snake River Valley Estate Dry Moscato (\$18), an exceptionally floral, spicy and penetrating take on the varietal. What's more, the wine was made with the first Muscat-Otonel grapes off a new vineyard planted by Hat Ranch owners Tim and Helen Harless, who established the winery just five years ago.

Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog could identify with their success, given that the muscatel they savored through straws in "The Muppet Movie" takes its name from the broad family of muscat grapes.