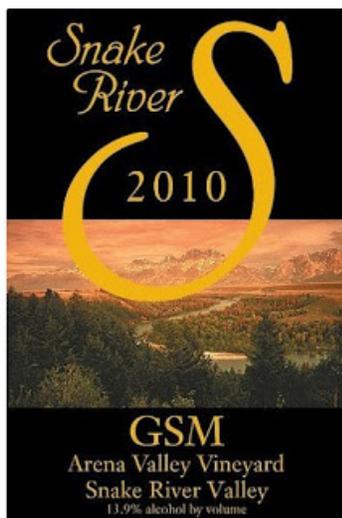


Re-discovering Idaho Wines: Snake River GSM, Arena Valley Vineyards, 2010

By Hoke Harden, December 7, 2015



Utter the phrase “Idaho Wine” and you’ll quite often get quizzical stares.

“Idaho,” people say. “They have wines in Idaho?”

Actually, yes they do. For quite a while now. And many of them are excellent. All states in the U.S. now have wines (although not all of them have vineyards). Idaho has both well-developed vineyards and experienced growers and wine producers, with a history going back many years.

Over 25 years ago I sold Idaho wine, and quite a bit of it too. True, it was mostly in the Pacific Northwest, and most Idaho wines stayed regional, only rarely ‘breaking out’ to the rest of the U.S.

Wine, more than most things, is all about perception. Idaho, saddled with license plates that proclaim “Famous Potatoes” is not immediately perceived as a quality wine-producing region. Yet it certainly does not lack the potential. Idaho has the climates, the soils, the locations and the expertise, both from advanced education and long years of experience, to excel in the wine business.

The challenges for Idaho wine are two-fold: First to get recognition and availability in what is now a very crowded marketplace, and second, to develop a specific identity. These are exactly the same challenges that once faced California, then Washington, then Oregon.

I decided to take a current look at the Idaho wine business and acquired a representative sampling of what was available...even if only in Idaho.

What did I discover? That Idaho wines are much like wines from other regions. Some are strictly mercantile, made to be high volume and inexpensive; most of these are not memorable, because they are not intended to be memorable. Some are quite good, sturdy and tasty and well made, showing either strong varietal character or distinctive stylistic touches. A few are excellent examples of that ‘holy triumvirate’ of distinctive wines, the three-legged stool of grape variety, terroir and personal style.

Snake River G-S-M, Arena Valley Vineyards, Snake River Valley, 2010

If you’re a fan of the Aussie version of GSM, that shiny, glossy, fat-fruited and plush take on the key Rhone Valley varieties, Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre, then you might want to give this one a try.

It’s a tasty little thing, bursting with flavor but restrained just enough to keep it from being over-weight or jammy. There’s a fresh, fruity, vigorous and vivacious berry medley---blueberry, strawberry, raspberry, and black cherry---vibe that surges out of the glass, and its backed up with clove and black pepper spice. The three primary grapes simply work well together, while each manages to maintain its own identity.

With blends, it is easy to submerge or mask the character of one grape by allowing another to dominate it. This blend, however, allows each of the varieties to declare itself clearly, while relying on the finished wine to let them mingle comfortably and well.

The wine is not shy; neither is it overblown. The balance is impeccable. As a fellow taster noticed, "This one lets you taste each one of the grapes so you can appreciate the combination of them."

That's an astute observation, because these grapes show well, separately and together. That's a sign of both good fruit to begin and some capable, nuanced winemaking.

The price, established at \$21.00, nudges just over the \$20 barrier; for the quality of the wine, that is reasonable. If you're traveling through Boise, there is a convenient winery tasting and sales room located on Broad Street downtown.

Take a peek at their website for more information. For another opinion, here's what Andy Perdue said at Great Northwest Wines. And go here for the Terroirist take in his wine blog.

Arena Valley Vineyards bills itself as a small batch winemaker, and that is evident from their planting regimen. With 75 acres planted eclectically amongst varieties from the Rhone Valley (Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre), the Douro Valley (Tempranillo, Touriga), Austria (Blauer Zweigelt), and Northern Italy (Barbera) carefully sited along the slopes overlooking the Snake River valley, there is obviously an attempt to develop varieties that do well in specific areas of soil and micro-climate, not simply blanketing the slopes with the standard Chardonnay-Cabernet-Merlot (although they have those as well, albeit in small quantities).

If Snake River's Arena Valley can produce a G-S-M as lively as this, I'd be happy to try some of their other wine releases, whether blends or stand-alone varieties. Good fruit, well-husbanded vines, and a sensitivity in winemaking that allows a natural, unforced expression without any sense of heavy-handed manipulation: that describes an operation with impressive potential.

