

Re-discovering Idaho wines: Hat Ranch Winery Malbec, Snake River Valley, 2011

By Hoke Harden, December 8, 2015



It has gotten to the point that I don't often reach for a new world Malbec wine anymore. Here's an exception: Hat Ranch Winery Malbec, Snake River Valley, Idaho.

The variety had promise, I thought, when the Argentinean wines began to climb in popularity, followed by selected plantings of California and the swift adaption by Chile. The South American versions tended towards a softer, more unctuous and less tannic style than the traditional Cahors wines of southern France (which I still love, by the way), while the American version, originally planted for the hoped-for success of the Meritage Red Blend concept which sadly never quite materialized, got slotted as a successor for merlot.

Fast forward though, and my hopes receded, replaced by the volume-production banality of Malbec-as-the-next-Merlot. Many of the lovely Argentine Malbecs became largely indistinguishable from the same brand version of Cabernet, Merlot---especially Merlot---and even Cabernet Franc. Seems that dangerous goal of mass production had manipulated the Malbec into just another red wine entirely dominated by sweet and glossy vanilla-oak overdose.

The American version, when grown to be blended, produced some outstanding single-variety versions---such as the original Clos du Bois and the outstanding Jekel Sanctuary Vineyard versions---but when turned to just another slot at a similar price point, they too began to taste eerily similar, and singularly less interesting for that similarity.

I was quite surprised, then, when during my journey of re-discovery of Idaho wines, I came across an impressive Malbec from the Snake River viticultural area, the Hat Ranch Malbec 2011.

Hat Ranch Malbec is neither the teeth-staining black wine of Cahors nor the pretty but inconsequential Argentinean cuties, but somewhere in between. And in this case, in between is a very good place to be. Neither blockbuster nor plonk, Hat Ranch Malbec is an easily drinkable and highly enjoyable table wine, with some polished tannins, laudable fruit, and robust earthiness, more the Bordeaux style than the rugged, austere Cahors, one could say.

Tim Harless, Hat Ranch winemaker, sources the grapes from the Arena Valley Vineyard, estate vineyard of the Snake River Winery. 2011 was the first release, and the following 2012 showed it was not a one-trick-pony effort. It's beginning to look like the Malbec grape has a promising future for the Snake River region, providing a sturdy platform for a rich, berry-laden red (think blackberry and boysenberry) that can handle moderate oak influence with style and flair. The Hat Ranch Malbec is a lovely example of the convergence of grape/place/person for good wine, and something worth seeking out.

