

POSTCARD



The first high-quality wines I tasted from the oft-neglected state of Idaho, in 1992, were a rosé and a Gewürztraminer from (then and now) its largest winery, Ste. Chappelle, along with a shockingly good Pinot

Noir from relatively tiny Indian Creek. They were then among 10 wineries in Idaho, a figure that has

since more than quadrupled; from 700 acres of vines back then, the state's planted acreage has grown to more than 1,600.

Most of the wine industry is based in the Snake River Valley, an American Viticultural Area (AVA) that Idaho shares in small part with Oregon, on volcanic soils formed from prehistoric Lake Idaho. Winter kill is common in this high, arid climate, especially in plantings near the river, but the appellation has the advantage of proximity to the capital city of Boise. A second AVA, Clearwater Canyon, is being studied.

At Bitner Vineyards, I was treated by owner Ron Bitner to a wide range of samples—including the oldest drinkable Idaho wine available, a 1990 Auslese-level, botrytized Riesling with layers of delicious honey and green-tea character. His flagship Chardonnay, from vines first planted in 1980, was sound, but I found more excitement in reds like a concentrated Merlot.

Sawtooth Winery in Nampa has received numerous awards for its aromatic whites as well as for its reds. The Merlot here was my favorite—no less the entry-level offering than the well-aged reserve.

The gentle slopes at Cold Springs Winery, high above the Snake River, are well positioned to take advantage of diurnal temperature swings and regular breezes. Winemaker Jamie Martin oversees a collection of wines packaged in clever “ology”-labeled bottles, including a tasty Syrah Carpology (a new one on me, meaning the study of fruit and seeds).

Some of Idaho's most sought-after bottlings come from the hands of Bill Fraser, whose winery is the first to be established in Boise since Prohibition. He impressed me with his big-boned yet balanced Cabernet Sauvignon, his complex and savory Viognier, and his direct personality.

The organic-from-inception young vines of Gary and Martha Cunningham's isolated 3 Horse Ranch excel in the Rhône varieties of Syrah, Viognier, and Roussanne, though the Cunninghams evince equal pride in their Riesling and Malbec. Their Roussanne shows as much aging capacity as their Syrah.

Local-boy-made-good Mike Crowley's Syringa Winery is a bootstrap operation named for his niece, who, in turn, was named for the state flower. His wines from purchased grapes, primarily Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc, are reasonably priced and easy-drinking.

Youngsters Melanie Krause and Joe Schnerr of Cinder Wines are relative newcomers, having returned home in 2006 following a stint in California. Clean, modern labeling and a penchant for good Viognier and Tempranillo from contracted vineyards are the calling cards here.

Indian Creek pioneer Bill Stowe, pictured above with me, and his family have dedicated half their production to Pinot Noir. His daughter Tammy is responsible for design and sales, while his son-in-law Mike McClure's background as a geologist makes him an obvious candidate for vineyard work. The Pinot I took note of so long ago hasn't diminished in quality, but has been joined by a toothsome Malbec and a Viognier. If you can't find them in your state, try London, where Indian Creek has been represented for years.

Boise surprised me with a plethora of modern dining and drinking haunts, complementing an outdoor-oriented culture. While it may be too soon to predict which varieties will excel in Idaho, it's one of a handful of up-and-coming states to watch for in terms of quality coupled with value in both reds and whites.

*Cheers, David Furer*