

# SNOW ON WINE

Dr. Jeff Snow, Director of Education  
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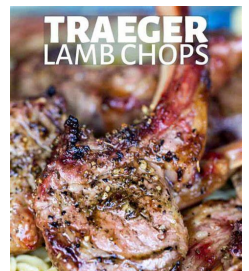
## LOST COUSIN WITH IDENTITY CRISIS



Carmenere was widely planted in the Bordeaux area from the dawn of winemaking. But after the 1870 Phylloxera root louse invasion wiped out essentially all their vines, it was abandoned by the fickle French, and not replanted in Bordeaux. Today only about 50 acres can be found in France. For a time some thought the variety was essentially extinct. But then came DNA. In Chile thriving vines which had been brought from France in the mid-nineteenth century as Merlot were proven by DNA to be Carmenere. And similarly in Italy some vines thought to be Cabernet Franc turned out to be Carmenere. And likewise a few in California. A natural confusion because Carmenere grape clusters and leaves are very similar to Merlot. And DNA analysis shows it to be a natural cross between Cabernet Franc and the no longer cultivated variety Gros Cabernet. Thus Carmenere, a half sibling to both Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon and a Malbec cousin, had just been assigned the wrong identity. Once thought lost -- now found scattered all over the world, and thriving. Small amounts are found in Washington, as well as California, British Columbia, Argentina, Italy, China and elsewhere, but the main Carmenere Kingdom today is unquestionably Chile.

Carmenere vines have small bunches of deep blue berries, similar to the Merlot which we see around Washington. It likes sandy soil and is notably late ripening (usually 5 weeks after Merlot). It needs a lot of “therms” to finally ripen. Oh yeah -- sand, lots of heat and time for late ripening – “...this makes Red Mountain one of the best places in Washington to successfully ripen it. It is a high risk variety. When it works it is gorgeous!”<sup>1</sup> Unappetizing herbaceous and capsicum flavors can result when picked too early. With fuller ripening these turn to red berry, sometimes black pepper and a little tomatoey taste. Full maturity brings blackberry and blueberry, chocolate and coffee, but at this stage acidity can drop. So when full skin or phenolic ripeness arrives it is QUICK QUICK – PICK PICK

<sup>1</sup> Otherwise a flat, flabby unbalanced wine with too little acid results. So depending on the terroir, how the grower times harvest, and the winemakers skills, Carmenere can show wide ranging flavor identity. In Washington “I think growers also have learned much about growing this variety and winemakers and consumers now find the minty herbal flavors of this variety very attractive. A few years ago there was almost no acceptance of minty, herbal flavors in Washington red wines.”<sup>1</sup> Sounds like we should expect more of it in Washington in the near future. And a rich Bordeaux style wine with a hint of mint – I say time to rub-up a nice cut of lamb with butter mixed with fresh rosemary and chopped mint leaves, then light the Traeger.



Wondering like me why you haven't seen much Carmenere in Washington yet? The table below from the Washington State Wine Commission 2022 report shows 186,870 tons of red grapes crushed. You can see over half is Cabernet Sauvignon and most of the rest is nine other red grapes (none being Carmenere). “Other red varieties” shows 4,515 tons – about three percent – and must include Carmenere, among a number of others. Tyler Williams reports that Kiona harvested about 17 tons of Carmenere from Heart of the Hill Vineyard<sup>3</sup>. The terroir in the Lewiston/Clarkston area is also favorable to our lost cousin grape. Expect to find bits here and there on warmer south facing slopes with sandy alluvial soil that it enjoys.

Many of you, my readers, raved to me about Liberty Lake Wine Cellars 2020 version. So I headed there to find out about **Mark Lathrop's** amazing 93 point (Wine Enthusiast (WE)/M.A.) 2020 Carmenere. As noted, harvest timing can dramatically vary flavor and balance and Mark likes his Carmenere picked early. Maybe the best way for us "civilians" to understand time of harvest is to compare to dates for picking Merlot which worldwide is usually considered fully ripe 4 to 5 weeks before Carmenere. Mark's harvest records showed that Tyler Williams (Kiona) picks it for him from Heart of the Hill vineyard on Red Mountain less than one week after his Merlot (usually 3 to 5 days later). So early!! His acclaimed 2020 was picked at 230 Brix, or typical early sugar maturity, but weeks before full phenolic or skin maturity. Thus the fruit is on the brighter, lighter red end, rather than blackberry/blueberry seen with later pick. "This wine's aromas of dark raspberry, cinnamon, straw and orange-flavored



StARBURST candy..." followed by "...actual sipping...the wine's fresh, brisk texture, lighter body, restrained alcohol and flavors like raspberry, lemon and a hint of cranberry."<sup>5</sup> said WE, I would agree with the WE review but add that on the very late palate (my passion for the late palate being well know) I noted hints of rosemary and mint. (Is my lamb done yet)? To study how best to make it Mark sampled a few Chilean Carmenere wines, and felt they haven't sent us their best. He commonly found prominent aroma of Jalapeno/Poblano pepper. Higher yields (over 3.5 up to 5 tons/acre) and earlier harvest embellish these aromas but they vanish with longer hang times. It is worth noting that in Chile, the world's "gold standard" for Carmenere, in 2020 Wine Enthusiast only awarded four wines 94 points and four wines 93 points of the huge number they evaluated. So Washington is certainly in the race, but it is much easier to find one from Chile. To better understand Mark's Carmenere "learning curve" we sampled all the vintages from 2018 through the yet unreleased 2021. Some had mint but no herbaceousness and some were the opposite, and a couple had Jalapeno on the nose. All benefit from time in barrel, about 30% new, resulting in silky smooth wine with perfect balance.

**Phil Butterfield** at Winescape Winery gets most of the rest of Heart of the Hill Carmenere but harvests it later<sup>4</sup>. Later pick would likely have more sugar yielding higher alcohol and a swing of fruit flavors toward darker reds and perhaps some of the blackberry identity classically discribed<sup>2</sup>. Mark thinks "more should be planted. It is a happy grape here in Washington."



Although considered a Bordeaux varietal, don't look for it there. Today it's main home is Chile. It needs a long growing season, and with global warming the terroir of Washington is becoming more to it's liking. And our location on the 46th parallel gives us the long ripening days this Bordeaux cousin needs. Although it can often be so similar to it's half siblings and cousins, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec as to be mistaken for them, it can show a wide range of aromas and flavors such as Jalapeno/Pablano Pepper, mint, rosemary and others. I marvel at all the wonderful food pairings for differently grown and vinified identities of Carmenere. Because it is currently a rarity here, today you should go to Chilean labels to get to know Carmenere and several of it's various identities. It is above all a wine of many identities and again, "**when it works it is gorgeous!**"<sup>1</sup>.

#### **References:**

- 1) Personal communication: Dr. Thomas Henick-Kling, Professor of Enology, Department of Viticulture and Enology, Washington State University, Wine Science Center.
- 2) Jancis Robinson et al, Wine Grapes, HarperCollins ECCO, New York, 2012, pp 189 – 192.
- 3) Personal communication: Tyler Williams, Winemaker and 3rd generation of Kiona Vineyards and Winery.
- 4) Personal communication: Mark and Sarah Lathrup, Liberty Lake Wine Cellars, May 20, 2023.
- 5) Wine Enthusiast Buying Guide, June/July, 2023, Reviewer M.A. abbreviated WE.

# 2022 HARVEST KEY STATS

**240,000**  
TONS HARVESTED

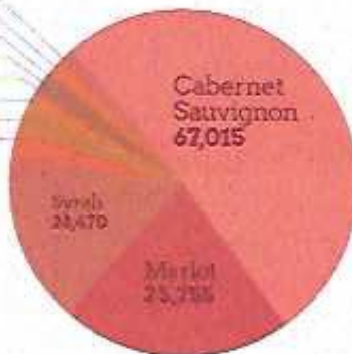


Red	136,870 TONS	+23%
White	103,130 TONS	+50%

## GRAPE VARIETIES

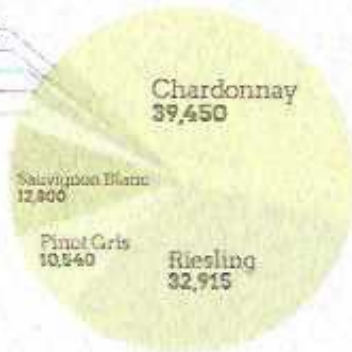
### REDS 136,870 TONS

- Other red varieties 4,515
- Pinot Noir 2,860
- Mourvedre 1,425
- Petit Verdot 1,110
- Grenache Noir 2,020
- Sangiovese 1,695
- Malbec 3,980
- Cabernet Franc 8,025



### WHITES 103,130 TONS

- Other white varieties 2,625
- Chenin Blanc 420
- Semillon 525
- Viognier 1,800
- Gewurztraminer 2,055



## INDUSTRY GROWTH

### TONS HARVESTED

2022	240,000
2021	179,600
2020	178,500
2019	201,000
2018	261,000
2017	229,000
2016	270,000
2015	222,000
2014	227,000
2013	210,000
2012	188,000
2011	142,000
2010	160,000

### WINERIES

2022	1,070
2021	1,050
2020	1,050
2019	1,000
2018	970
2017	940
2016	900
2015	890
2014	871
2013	818
2012	760
2011	740
2010	686
2009	620

This report is prepared from information provided by wineries to the Washington State Wine Commission as part of the Annual Grape Report crush survey.