

You can't escape geography as you travel through the Columbia River wine country.

The sinewy swath carved by the huge snake that is the Columbia River is a weighty presence threading through the area's parched, rocky, and sandy soils. To the west, the white-tipped North Cascade Mountains anchor the horizon. The sky is boundless, the air startlingly fresh.

Wherever you look here, you confront elemental geography: earth, water, air. In certain places, these features combine to create good grape-growing microclimates. If wine is made in the vineyard, as winemakers are fond of saying, then surely in this Central Washington wine country, the vineyard is made by its geography.

Grape-growing along this stretch of the Columbia goes back at least to the 1870s, yet only recently has a critical mass of vineyards and wineries come together to promote themselves as the Columbia River Wine Country (www.columbiariverwine.com).

Some of these winemakers are the

scions of local farming families who have diversified into wine. Others have moved to this still-young wine country to build a new life. Either way, they all seem to have two traits in common: a sense of vision and a Columbia River address. "All of us have vineyards or wineries that can see the Columbia River," explains Laura Laurent-Mrachek, co-owner of Saint Laurent winery. "It is the river that most influences our grapes and wines."

The Columbia's importance to these wineries is hard to overstate. Its erosion helped hew the broad bench lands that are increasingly being cultivated to grapes. Its channel helped direct and partially contain the waters of the Missoula Floods, whose mixed sediments provide a varied matrix for vine roots. And its moderating effect on local air temperatures—keeping the bench lands cooler in summer and warmer in winter—gives grapes protection from weather extremes.

At the southern end of the Columbia River Wine Country, about 50 miles southeast of Wenatchee, **Cave B Estate Winery** offers perhaps the most vivid illustration of the region's landscape. Here windswept grapevines look down nearly 900 feet to the shimmering Columbia.

"We make wine only from grapes we grow on the property," says Cave B winemaker Berle "Rusty" Figgins proudly. It can be a challenge to build wines of complexity and depth exclusively from estate grapes grown from a relatively fixed vineyard palette: "The wines have to be completely expressive of the site, and completely reflective of the skills we have. Everything we do ends up being seen in the bottle."

Luckily for Figgins and assistant winemaker Freddy Arredondo, the Cave B estate is substantial. Its 120 acres of vineyards grow 15 different varietals, on four distinct soil families, in 30 different vineyards. That, plus vines of varying ages—including 28-year-old cabernet sauvignon vines—and a growing season lengthened by the river's cooling summer air, offers more than enough tools to work with.

In a tasting room carved into the side of a rocky bluff, you can choose among a half-dozen white wines, including a sparkling blanc de blancs, a softer frizzante, and a true Sémillon ice wine. As for the reds, they range from a dead serious rosé (a two-barrel production aged for two months in oak) to Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, Syrah, and a just-released Bordeaux-style blend.

Figgins's estate focus shows in the fruit clarity of his white wines (the Riesling is especially delightful), and in reds with power, structure (thanks to tannins from grape skins exposed to lots of wind), and dramatic flavors (the Syrah was my favorite). Let's see: drama, power, structure... sounds like good words to describe Cave B's setting, too.