

Washington State 2020: Vintage report and top-scoring wines

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6–8 minutes

In uniquely challenging year, beset by wildfire smoke and the chaos of the pandemic, [Washington State](#) made some wonderfully balanced wines in 2020. The best show great ripeness, well-managed tannins and fresh acidity.

The [smoke](#) which blanketed the region in September seemed to have a mixed impact. The producers I spoke with were mainly unconcerned about their wines and I found little troubling the samples I tasted. But at least one producer I spoke to, Betz Family Winery, decided not to make any wines in 2020 out of concern for smoke taint.

‘Of course, 2020 had the additional challenge of [Covid-19](#),’ said Jason Gorski, director of winemaking at Delille Cellars. ‘We wrote out protocols for what to do if the whole winemaking team got sick and guidelines to the rest of the company outlining what they’d need to do with fruit already in the winery if we all went down.’

‘We isolated ourselves and made sure to avoid any potential exposure we could,’ Gorski continued. ‘And we had additional concerns for our essential partners during that time: picking crews, vineyard staff and trucking companies. While people got sick here and there, operations continued, and we were able to make wine

and keep the business moving forward. We were fortunate.'

[See all Washington State 2020 vintage tasting notes and scores](#)



Jason Gorski of DeLille Cellars collecting samples on Red Mountain.
Credit: DeLille Cellars

Washington State 2020: top five wines of the vintage

DeLille Cellars, Harrison Hill, Snipes Mountain 97 points

Quilceda Creek, Tchelistscheff Clone 412, Horse Heaven Hills 97 points

Cadence, Camerata, Red Mountain 96 points

Doubleback, Cabernet Sauvignon, Columbia Valley 96 points

Trothe, Cabernet Sauvignon, Horse Heaven Hills 96 points

Predictable beginnings

The 2020 vintage in Washington began fairly predictably, following a cold close to the 2019 growing season. October of that year was the second coldest recorded since 1895, with record-low temperatures and early-season snow. November and December were extraordinarily dry, followed by a very wet January. Drier months followed into spring.

Bud break began across the state in mid-April, similar to recent averages, and flowering was slightly ahead of recent years, beginning in the third week of May. The warm, dry spring was followed by a classic Northwest cool, wet ‘Juneuary’ for the first part of the month. This slowed ripening a little, but warm weather in July brought on veraison by the third week of the month.

Harvest began across the state by the third week of August, slightly ahead of longer-term averages but tracking normally for the recent warm-vintage trends seen across the state.

‘In a uniquely challenging year, Washington made some wonderfully balanced wines in 2020. The best show great ripeness well-managed tannins and fresh acidity.’

A challenging finish

Things heated up further in September and then what had been a fairly normal vintage took a destructive turn. A record-breaking wildfire season in Oregon had an intense impact on air quality throughout the Pacific Northwest. There were fatalities and an immense loss of property, with more than 400,000ha of forest burned. The wildfire smoke made its way to Washington State, and hazardous air quality forced a halt to the harvest.

The smoke blocked out the sun which stalled sugar accumulation in grapes that remained on the vine. Evidence of smoke taint varied

from region to region throughout Washington State meaning that 2020 was not a complete loss as it was in parts of California and Oregon.

When the smoke cleared, warm temperatures gave way to a freeze on 25 October but by then most of the fruit had been picked.

Overall, yields were down – in some cases significantly– increasing concentration in varieties with smaller berries and clusters.



Grapes ready for harvest. Credit: Quilceda Creek

The resulting wines

The most enjoyable Washington wines from 2020 are expressive and powerful with balanced tannins. Bordeaux varieties, particularly Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, stood out. The top wines show ample fruit concentration, minerality and a savoury character, the terroir of the state's various AVAs showing through in both taste and structure. Tannins in Washington can become unruly, but talented winemakers use them to build wines of complexity and structure that will age for a decade or more.

Paul Golitzin, president and director of winemaking at Quilceda Creek, said 2020 was a vintage with ample silver linings. ‘It was undeniably a challenging year for all of us, and stressful with the wildfires to the south, but we were fortunate to navigate through it and produce some of our best wines ever. It’s a classic vintage for Quilceda Creek – the wines have tremendous concentration and depth.’

‘Overall, the 2020s offer a bit of extra concentration from the low yields,’ said Delille’s Jason Gorski. ‘These are wines with a present but accessible tannin structure. The vintage provided ample fruit flavours to complement our house style, which leans towards elegance, balance and freshness. We are very proud of the wines produced despite the demanding circumstances.’



Paul Golitzin looks on at the winemaking process. Credit: Quilceda Creek

Washington State vintage ratings

2020 3/5

In this slightly warmer than average year, the Covid-19 pandemic forced wineries to create strategies that allowed them to continue to make wine. The best show finesse and balance, with fine examples in particular coming from the Red Mountain and Horse Heaven Hills AVAs. In September, wildfires raged to the south in Oregon, creating difficulty with ripening and impacting some vineyards with smoke taint, however there wasn't the same widespread damage here as there was in parts of Oregon and California.

2019 5/5

A cooler year for Washington's warm, largely desert-growing conditions, delivering wines with great elegance, finesse and balance. This, combined with a cold, wet winter, created delays in bud break and bloom. Challenging frost events in September and October contributed to smaller yields. The top wines show beautiful finesse and elegance balanced against Washington's characteristic tannin structure and reliable ripeness.

2018 4/5

A warmer-than-average year that began with a cool spring, a hot May and then a cooler June which growers have come to expect. Hotter temperatures in July and August sped things along. Wines were lush and ripe with both higher alcohols and yields.