



GUILD SOMM

Pacific Northwest

STAFF TRAINING GUIDE

As the United States' second and fourth largest wine producers, respectively, Washington State and Oregon represent two of the New World's most dynamic winegrowing areas. The Cascade Mountains provide a diversity of climates, allowing for abundant varieties and styles. While Oregon has made its mark with Pinot Noir, and Washington with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah, both states offer much to explore beyond their signature grapes.





History

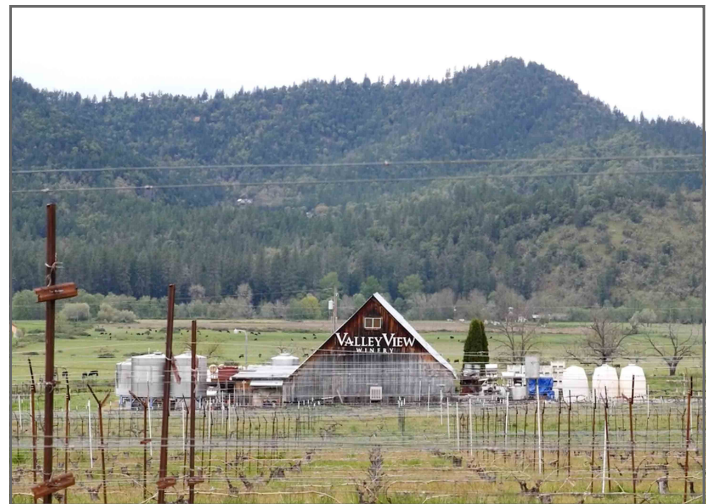
Washington and Oregon's winegrowing histories begin in the early to mid-19th century, decades before either achieved statehood. In Washington, the first grapes were planted in 1825 by the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, while Henderson Luelling brought cuttings from Iowa along his journey west on the Oregon Trail in 1847. The Pacific Northwest's first winery followed soon after, in 1854, when Peter Britt founded Valley View in Southern Oregon. In that same year, hybrid grape varieties arrived in Washington's Puget Sound. The Walla Walla Valley saw its first vines in 1860.

By the early 1900s, Washington and Oregon had burgeoning wine industries, but their growth was stifled by Prohibition. Both rebounded shortly after Prohibition's repeal, and by 1938, there were 42 wineries in Washington. The 1950s and '60s were decades of great modernization for both states. American Wine Growers, which would later be renamed Chateau Ste. Michelle and become Washington's largest winery, was founded in 1954. Here, legendary winemaker André Tchelistcheff championed the planting of vinifera grapes in Eastern Washington. In Oregon's Umpqua Valley, Richard Sommer founded HillCrest Vineyard in 1961, where he would plant the state's first Pinot Noir and Riesling vines. David Lett of Eyrie Vineyard then brought Pinot Noir to the Willamette Valley in 1965.

Oregon and Washington both earned their first American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in 1983, with the Willamette Valley and Yakima Valley, respectively. Today, Washington has more than 1,000 wineries, while nearly 800 call Oregon home.



Fort Vancouver, Washington



Valley View Winery, Rogue Valley, Oregon



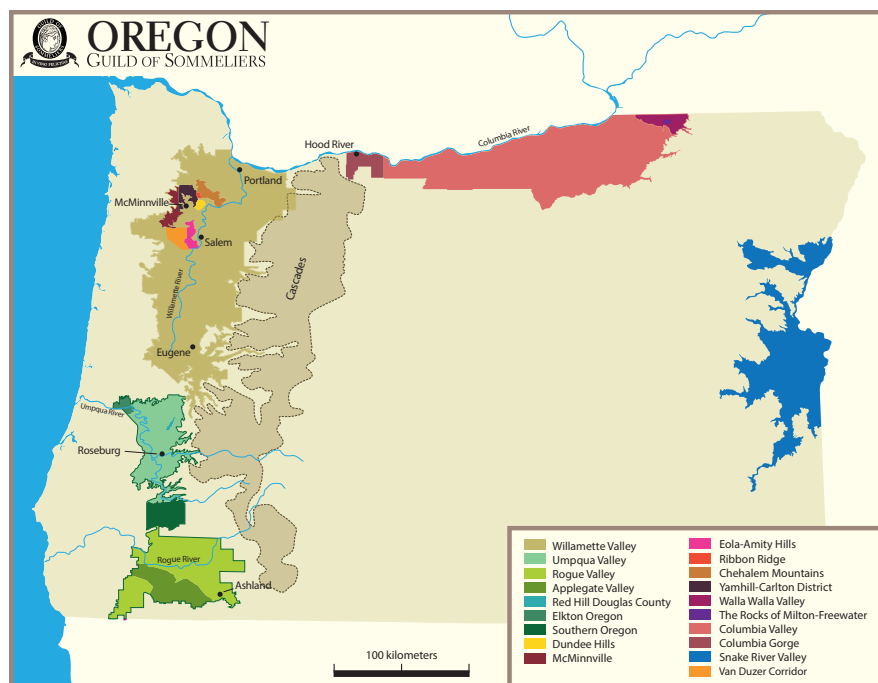
Geography & Climate

The Cascade Mountains have a profound, though opposite, impact on the major winegrowing regions of Washington and Oregon. Most of Oregon's major appellations lie to the west of the range, in more verdant, fertile ground exposed to the cooling effects of the Pacific Ocean. Washington's largest vineyard areas, conversely, are on the opposite side of the Cascades, generally in the eastern portions of the state. Moist air from the Pacific condenses into rain and snow as it passes over the Cascades, creating a rain shadow effect and leaving hotter, more arid conditions on the eastern slopes. As a result, irrigation is essential for vine health in many places.

Washington's eastern regions sit upon a bedrock of basalt, a volcanic rock formed by cooled lava. They are typically topped by sandy or silty loams developed from the Missoula Floods, a series of glacial floods at the end of the last ice age. The Columbia Valley's borders surround the Missoula Flood deposits, extending into Oregon.

There are varied soils in Oregon, but two are commonly spoken of in Willamette: Jory and Willakenzie. Jory soil is reddish and volcanic in origin, often described as yielding lighter, more elegant expressions of Pinot Noir. Willakenzie, on the other hand, derives from marine sediments and is said to offer more dark fruit-flavored, muscular wines. A third soil, windblown loess, can be found throughout the northern valley, often intermixed with marine and basalt-driven soils.

In Southern Oregon, a collection of small, sheltered valleys results in a climate more akin to inland California wine regions. Soils are varied as well, though largely informed by the Klamath Mountains to the west.





Wine Regions: Oregon

Most of Oregon's wine regions are in the western part of the state, and Washington's are in the east. The two states share several important AVAs, with boundaries crossing their borders.

Willamette Valley AVA

The Willamette Valley is Oregon's most famous winegrowing region, as well as one of the most successful homes for Pinot Noir in the New World. The large appellation begins at Portland and the Washington border and ends 150 miles later, just south of Eugene and halfway down the state. The Willamette River, a tributary of the Columbia River, flows north through the length of the region, bordered to the east by the Cascade Mountains. The most famous wines hail from the northern half of the Willamette Valley, where there are seven sub-AVAs: Yamhill-Carlton District, Chehalem Mountains, Ribbon Ridge, Dundee Hills, McMinnville, Eola-Amity Hills, and Van Duzer Corridor. To the south, the valley is less defined. While the Willamette is most associated with Pinot Noir, a number of sparkling wines and quality whites are also produced here, most notably from Chardonnay, Riesling, and Pinot Gris.

French Connection

Due to its ability to produce exceptional Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, the Willamette Valley has long conjured comparison to Burgundy, the ancestral home for both grapes. The French have taken note, and the Willamette is one of the few regions worldwide to earn significant Burgundian investment. The first such project was Domaine Drouhin, with its inaugural vintage in 1988.

Southern Oregon AVA

As the name suggests, Southern Oregon picks up after the Willamette, extending to Oregon's southern border with California. Southern Oregon can be subdivided into two sections, the Umpqua Valley AVA and Rogue Valley AVA. The Umpqua Valley grows generally warmer as it moves south, transitioning from an appellation for Pinot Noir and other cooler climate grapes to areas more associated with Syrah, Grenache, Tempranillo, and Merlot. Elkton AVA and Red Hill Douglas County AVA are both within the Umpqua Valley, the latter corresponding entirely to one property, the Red Hill Vineyard.

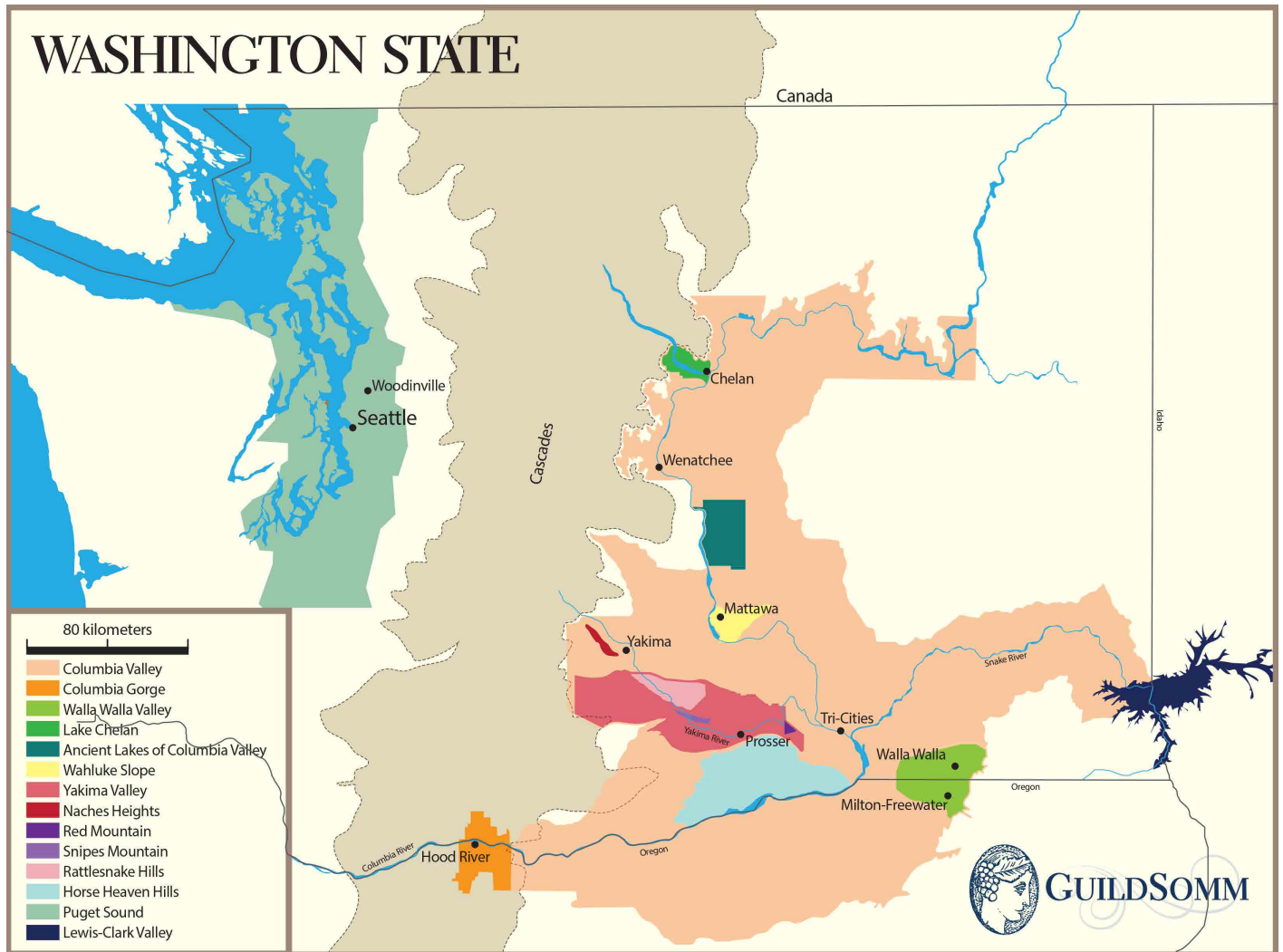
Further south, the Rogue Valley is warmer still, ripening Syrah and Bordeaux varieties, although cooler pockets can be found for aromatic whites and Pinot Noir. The mountainous terrain includes three valleys: Illinois Valley, Bear Creek Valley, and Applegate Valley (also an AVA).



Wine Regions: Washington

Puget Sound AVA

Cool and rainy, the Puget Sound AVA surrounds Seattle, lining this inlet from the Pacific Ocean and including its many islands. The Puget Sound's most cultivated grapes are Madeleine Angevine, Siegerrebe, and Müller-Thurgau; Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris are grown as well. Also within the Puget Sound AVA is Woodinville, a town located east of Seattle and home to many wineries, as well as tasting rooms for producers in the harder-to-reach areas of the Columbia Valley.





Wine Regions: OR & WA

Columbia Valley AVA

The Columbia Valley covers a massive swath of land, over 11 million acres. Though shared by Washington and Oregon, over 75% of the AVA is in Washington. The region follows the path of the Columbia River, as well as its tributary the Snake River, before it enters Idaho. Due to its scale, the Columbia Valley is varied, containing several sub-AVAs.

Walla Walla Valley is one of the Columbia Valley's best-known nested AVAs. The region produces several of Washington's most prestigious Syrah, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon wines. On Walla Walla's Oregon side, The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater sub-AVA is named for the large cobblestones that cover vineyard surfaces, akin to the *galets roulés* of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. It is known for Syrah and Grenache, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon.

Nine of the Columbia Valley's sub-AVAs sit exclusively in Washington. The Horse Heaven Hills AVA is one of the largest contributors to the state's output and includes several pedigreed sites. The Yakima Valley AVA, surrounding the Yakima tributary, lies just north and contains some of Washington's oldest vines. It encompasses the Red Mountain, Snipes Mountain, and Rattlesnake Hills AVAs—all known for Bordeaux varieties. More northerly AVAs include Naches Heights, Wahluke Slope, Ancient Lakes, and Lake Chelan.

Columbia Gorge AVA

The Columbia Gorge AVA straddles the Oregon-Washington border on either side of the Columbia River, and between Mount Hood and Mount Adams. Roughly two-thirds of the appellation sits inside Oregon, and one-third is in Washington. It is one of three Washington AVAs (along with Puget Sound and Lewis-Clark Valley) not within the Columbia Valley AVA. Bottling more whites than reds, the Columbia Gorge harvests everything from Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, and Albariño to Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Zinfandel.

Idaho

While Idaho might not be the first state to come to mind when considering American wine country, it has a growing industry featuring more than 60 wineries. Idaho has three AVAs: Lewis-Clark Valley (shared with Washington), Snake River Valley (shared with Oregon), and Eagle Foothills (a sub-AVA of Snake River Valley). Major grapes include Chardonnay, Riesling, Syrah, and Merlot.

British Columbia

Just north of Washington State, British Columbia shares many core varieties with its American neighbors, among them Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon. Most of British Columbia's wine regions hug the United States border, the most important being the Okanagan Valley.



Major Grape Varieties

Washington and Oregon grow more than 70 different grapes, ranging from Italian staples like Nebbiolo and Sangiovese to German rarities, such as Siegerrebe. However, production is focused on a selection of classic varieties.

White Varieties

Chardonnay: While top-quality Chardonnay was late to arrive in Oregon, the Burgundian variety has observed a major resurgence in recent years. In Washington, it remains the state's most planted white. Chardonnay demonstrates a broad spectrum of stylistic expressions, including restrained examples from cooler climates as well as more opulent, creamy renditions, aged in oak and completing full malolactic conversion. Beyond still wines, Chardonnay is an important variety for traditional method sparkling wines.

Pinot Gris: First planted by David Lett of Eyrie Vineyards, Pinot Gris is Oregon's most planted white variety. Technically, Pinot Gris is a pigment mutation of Pinot Noir, leaving the grape with pink skins. Softly floral, Oregon Pinot Gris tends to be vinified more in the tradition of rounder, richer Alsatian expressions than crisper Italian Pinot Grigio. Outside of Oregon, Pinot Gris is also grown in Washington's Puget Sound AVA.

Riesling: Both Washington and Oregon bottle many exceptional Rieslings, ranging from bone-dry renditions to dessert wines. The wines are marked by an elevated acidity, as well as floral and tart fruit flavors. Top examples of Pacific Northwest Riesling demonstrate a capacity to age. The grape thrives in cooler climates but can be found in many winegrowing areas in each state, including the Columbia and Willamette Valleys. Washington in particular has attracted several collaborations with top German winemakers of Riesling to produce special labels.

Sauvignon Blanc: While less important in the Pacific Northwest than in California, Sauvignon Blanc maintains sizeable plantings in Washington, though minimal ones in Oregon. The wines are enjoyed for their racy "green" flavors, often somewhat herbaceous. Though commonly bottled monovarietally, Sauvignon Blanc can also be blended with Sémillon and aged in oak in the style of white Bordeaux.

Other White Grapes: Sémillon, Viognier, Chenin Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Siegerrebe, Müller-Thurgau, Madeleine Angevine, Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, Aligoté.



Pinot Gris



Major Grape Varieties

Red Varieties

Pinot Noir: Pinot Noir first arrived in Oregon in the 1960s and today is the state's most planted grape, accounting for more than half of total plantings. The Burgundian variety thrives in colder climates and is particularly revered for its elegance and transparency in expressing the site in which it was grown. Many Willamette Pinot Noir producers will offer several bottlings from different single vineyards. Beyond the Willamette, Pinot Noir can also be found in cool pockets of the Umpqua and Rogue Valleys, as well as Washington's Puget Sound. In addition to still wines, Pinot Noir is an essential ingredient in many traditional method sparkling wines.

Cabernet Sauvignon: Washington State's most planted grape, Cabernet Sauvignon is admired for its dark-fruited intensity, firm tannic structure, and ability to age. Cabernet is responsible for many of Washington's most expensive wines and can be found in various corners of the Columbia Valley. Most of Western Oregon is too cool to fully ripen Cabernet Sauvignon, although examples are grown in warmer areas of the Rogue Valley. While often bottled on its own, Cabernet Sauvignon is commonly blended with Merlot, as well as with Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec.

Merlot: Often compared to Cabernet Sauvignon in terms of its plummy, dark-fruited flavors, Merlot is also perceived as fruitier and can ripen earlier and in cooler climates. Many praise the "velvety" texture of Merlot's tannins, as well as its accessibility when young. While Merlot can often be used as a blending component with Cabernet, many Washington wineries celebrate the variety with top-shelf bottlings. It can also be cultivated in some of Oregon's warmer areas, such as the Umpqua and Rogue Valleys, as well as the shared Columbia Gorge and Columbia Valley.

Beer

Both Washington and Oregon celebrate vibrant beer cultures. Washington has the third largest number of independent breweries, while Portland, Oregon, is eighth in terms of breweries per capita. Further, roughly 97% of US hops production is centered in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho—with 75% harvested in the Yakima Valley. As the saying goes, *it takes a lot of beer to make great wine*—and the Pacific Northwest has no shortage of either.

Syrah: Washington has observed a dramatic increase in Syrah acreage within the last two decades, and the variety represents some of the state's most sought-after wines. Characterized as spicy and meaty with dark, brambly fruit flavors, Syrah can be bottled on its own or with other Rhône varieties such as Grenache and Mourvèdre, or in more atypical combinations. Capable of producing complex wines in both cooler and warmer climates, Syrah is also Oregon's second most planted red, though it still largely trails Pinot Noir.

Other Red Grapes: Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Sangiovese, Nebbiolo, Tempranillo.



Selling Pacific Northwest Wines

With its incredible range of grapes and climates, the Pacific Northwest offers a palette of wines adaptable to most any occasion. Its wines find many counterparts in the Old World and California—from Columbia Valley and Mosel Riesling, to Willamette Pinot Noir and Burgundy, to Walla Walla and Napa Valley Cabernet. Often, the Washington and Oregon examples offer tremendous comparative value. Both states are highly regarded for their culinary scenes, boasting local products such as salmon and Dungeness crab. When serving dishes incorporating Pacific Northwest ingredients and flavors, complementary wines from the same area can be a worthy selling point.

Guests looking for a lighter-bodied white might be directed to Riesling, especially for dishes with sweet or spicy components, or potentially a more restrained Chardonnay. If seeking more richness, Pinot Gris or fuller bodied Chardonnays are excellent choices. For reds, guests enjoying lighter fare, poultry, or mushroom-based dishes might be directed to Willamette Pinot Noir, whereas Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah are good pairings for heartier meats. Beyond pairings, Washington and Oregon's many lesser-known grapes are worth exploring with adventurous guests. Consider pouring them an Umpqua Valley Tempranillo or a Puget Sound Müller-Thurgau.

Review Questions

1. Name two AVAs shared by Washington and Oregon.
2. What is the major mountain range running through Washington and Oregon?
3. Describe the difference between Jory and Willakenzie soils.
4. What is the name of the AVA that surrounds Seattle?
5. Name Oregon's most planted grape.
6. What are some descriptors for Cabernet Sauvignon from Washington?

