



AMERICA'S FRONTIER WINE STATES



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Americans may believe size is important, but there is far more to the nation's wine than just what comes out of California, as **Norman Miller** discovers

C

alifornia is the Goliath of American wine, commanding over 80% of US wine production on average – and over 90% of exports, according to the Wine Institute. In terms of winery numbers, California has some 4,800 wineries and 5,900 growers. Its nearest rivals, Washington State and Oregon, have around 700 and 570 respectively.

But as Goliath found out, smaller doesn't mean insignificant. And some of the best and most interesting contemporary American wines are coming from among the dozen other US states that breach the 100+ mark for wineries.

While Oregon is already known in the UK for its superb Pinot Noir, Washington State actually produces around three times more wine, data from the US Tax and Trade Bureau reveals, with key areas situated around Puget Sound and a trio of valleys – Yakima, Columbia and Walla Walla. Acreage is soaring too, with around 40% of the state's 50,000 acres of ➤

“A Virginia wine made from North America grapes won ‘best wine’ at the Vienna World’s Fair in 1873”



vines planted in the last 10 years, according to Washington State Wine.

Cabernet Sauvignon is a strong Washington State performer, while its best Merlot offers sweet cherry flavours plus mint or spice notes. The state’s most interesting whites are floral Rieslings with vivid apricot, peach and apple flavours, plus buttery and vanilla Chardonnay.



NEW HORIZONS

The idea that three out of 50 states are the be-all-and-end-all of US viticulture fails to reflect the contemporary face of American wine. Beyond the bustle of the Big Apple, the vineyards of New York State outproduce Washington State – according to Statista – while Texas (see box) belies its stereotyped images of bad lands, oil wells and cowboys by having the country’s fifth highest number of wineries, at around 400.

Distinctive American Viticulture Areas (AVAs) beyond California, Oregon and Washington are creating a buzz within the US, and slowly gaining recognition in the UK by allying quality with distinctive novelty. Think Long Island ice wines, Texas Hill Tempranillo and Idaho Viognier, plus unique local varietals.

American wine-making took root in 17th century Virginia and Texas, using imported European vines. These, however, suffered badly in the New World – decimated by indigenous pests like phylloxera. The resistance of native plants to these blights led to a re-focus on Native American grapes that transformed early US wine making. A Virginia wine made from the indigenous Norton grape was named “best red wine of all nations” at the Vienna World’s Fair in 1873, where double gold also went to a sparkling blend of native Catawba and Delaware grapes from New York State.



NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Today, New York State – along with a rejuvenated Virginia – is leading the way in introducing UK wine buyers to less familiar states. Seven importers currently offer New York wines: Flint, Inverarity Morton, Bibendum, Matthew Clark, Wanderlust, Indigo and Top Selection. As a price guide, Bibendum sells Finger Lake’s Forge Cellars





Above left: tasting room, Channing Daughters, New York State
Above: Barboursville, Virginia
Bottom left: Chris Parker, Virginia Wine Academy

“The reaction from all our customers was initially surprise... The wines represented something new”
Chris Parker

TEXAS

Texas is big – around the same size as France – and its best wines spring from higher elevation AVAs like the High Plains and Texas Hill Country. A state of experiment exists as growers probe what works best in a terroir that combines intense summer heat with hazardous spring frosts.

Mourvèdre is showing promise as Texas’s signature grape, while heat-tolerant Tannat, Carignan, Cinsault, Tempranillo and Sangiovese do well too. And though reds dominate, noteworthy Texan whites are being made from Viognier, Picpoul and Vermentino. Vineyards that have earned plaudits include Pedernales Cellars, Bending Branch, Becker and Driftwood Estate.

MICHIGAN

There are around 140 wineries in a region locals nickname the Napa of the Midwest, dotted around various peninsulas on the shores of Lake Michigan. No single variety dominates from the dozens grown here, which include Aromella – an award-winning new grape from Cornell University. Vineyards highlighted by local experts include Dablon, Mari, Bel Lago, Black Star Farms and Chateau Grand Traverse.

Riesling at £19 and its Pinot Noir at £23. At Flint, Sam Clarke’s selection of wines from the Red Hook Winery now sells to around a dozen restaurants including Petrus, Sager & Wilde and The Lanesborough.

Sommelier Ed Thaw at London’s Leroy highlights New York wines like Clones from Long Island’s Channing Daughters vineyard – a wild-yeast barrel-fermented blend based primarily on multiple clones of Chardonnay, with five other grape varieties including Muscat Ottonel and Gewürztraminer. “Where else in the world can you find this?” he enthuses.

Mayfair restaurant Hide offers eight New York wines, sourced from nearby luxury wine retailer Hedonism. “We had the Paumanok Merlot on our wine pairing, which greatly increased the exposure of this region to our guests – and they always respond well,” says Hide wine manager Julia Sewell. M&S, meanwhile, quickly sold out when it offered supermarket customers Long Island vineyard Brotherhood’s Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc blend.

New York is America’s fourth-largest producer, with trade organisation New York Wines highlighting over two-dozen grape varieties. These include fine indigenous performers like Concord (red), Catawba (pink), and Niagara (white), alongside hybrids like Frontenac – created in the 1990s at the University of Minnesota – which produces deep garnet wines with pronounced tannins and notes of cherry, black pepper and spice on both nose and palate. Riesling and Merlot also perform well, pioneered here by the late Dr Konstantin Frank, whose eponymous vineyard remains a New York star.

Cornell University’s Agritech facility has added other new varieties to the local winemaking armoury, among them Noiret – think medium-bodied reds with aromas of pepper, blackberry and mint. The highly aromatic Valvin Muscat, meanwhile, underpins both dry whites and luscious dessert wines, while the semi-dry Cayuga offers Riesling-like aromas of apples, peaches and pears.

Of New York’s AVAs, the two making inroads into the UK are Long Island and the Finger Lakes. With sandy soil and moderate climate, Long Island’s 75+ wineries work with familiar European grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, as well as making fine ice wines. Around 125 wineries in the Finger Lakes inhabit a distinctive terroir whose output includes excellent Pinot Noir alongside native varieties, plus sparkling wines.



VIRGINIA

Chris Parker of New Horizon Wines and the Virginia Wine Academy has spearheaded Virginia wines’ arrival on this side of the Atlantic, starting a decade ago with an initial offering to carefully selected customers, which included Berry Bros & Rudd, Selfridges and Dinner by Heston Blumenthal. “Placement was critical, as was clear differentiation by varietal of distinct style and quality – for example, Viognier, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot,” explains Parker. “The reaction from all our customers was initially surprise. They were expecting wines of a California or Oregon style, but the wines represented something new and different for on- and off-trade. The retail prices ranged from £18 to £30, with two exceptions around £50.”

Home to seven AVAs with soils varying from highly decomposed granite in the west through red clay in the centre to sandy loamy soil near the coast, Virginia offers a diversity of terroir and some signature star turns.

“Viognier tends to be ripe, lush stone fruit, citrus, tropical – particularly mango – and floral – think honeysuckle and orange blossom – with slight minerality, and bright fresh acidity,” says Parker. The best single-varietal reds prompt a similar flurry of adjectives. “Cabernet Franc: bright, fresh red and black fruit, a hint of blackcurrant leaf, with medium body and medium acidity. And Petit Verdot – wonderfully scented – offering violets, bright ripe black and red fruit, deep colour, with vanilla, cedar and smoke.”

As in New York, the number of wineries is surging, rising from around 45 in the mid-1990s to over 275 today – from which Parker highlights Barboursville, Boxwood, Breaux, King Family, RdV Vineyards, Veritas, White Hall and Williamsburg.

In Idaho, next door to Oregon, the Snake River Valley’s semi-arid microclimate and volcanic soils produce good Riesling and big Pinot Noirs from around 30 wineries. Winebuyers.com is the state’s lone UK importer, offering a Syrah/Viognier blend and 100% Zinfandel from Koenig Vineyards – albeit not cheap at £38 and £47 respectively. “We wanted this on our platform as a point of difference,” says Ciara Hinton, the retailer’s head of marketing. “We continue to scope out trade tastings to expand our range.”

Missouri, meanwhile, was a leading American wine state before the Civil War. Today, its best wineries cluster around Augusta, and its best wines are white. Vignoles offer luscious floral aromas and notes of citrus, pineapple and apricot, while Traminette is a University of Illinois creation providing an American riff on Gewürztraminer. ■