

2006 Spring Release Weekend, Walla Walla, WA Report

The Tasters: Sean, Lindy, Kim, Jim, Pat, Sara

The Dates: April 1st & 2nd 2006

The Method: Wineries were selected on the following basis (not in this particular order):

- 1) High ratings in the Sullivan System for previous releases
- 2) High ratings in Wine Spectator for previous releases
- 3) Wineries proximity to each other

Each winery is rated as a destination from one star (lowest) to four stars (highest). We also list whether the winery charged a tasting fee, provide a brief summary of the winery, state local wine stores that currently carry their wine or have in the past, and provide ratings of the wines sampled.

All wines sampled were rated with the Sullivan System

- Refuse this wine if served.
- . Drink it if you must.
- + Worth drinking if presented to you.
- * Convince a friend to buy some and share it with you.
- ** Buy it now and either tell all your friends about it or keep it very, very secret, depending on your personality and availability.

Summary: 2 days, 21 wineries, over 80 wines tasted.

Spring Release is one of the premier, annual events in the Walla Walla Valley where winemakers show off their latest and, they hope, greatest. This year's releases showed lots of promise but most were too young to have realized their potential. To wit, only sixteen of the eighty-plus wines tasted received a double star rating. Given time however, many of these wines will show their true colors. I would expect many plus wines to become star and double star wines and many star wines to become double star wines.

The gem of Walla Walla continues to be Spring Valley. With a location that cannot be beat, a compelling family story, and a lineup of wine as impressive any the valley has to offer, this winery has it all. The surprises of the trip were Whitman Cellars and Tamarack. Whitman's wines showed great depth and complexity bottle for bottle. The 2002 Narcissa was particularly impressive. Tamarack's reserve wines, most low production wines available only at the winery, excelled.

Double Star Wines

- ** 2003 Stone River, Beresan
- ** 2003 Frederick, Spring Valley
- ** 2004 Walla Walla Merlot, Walla Walla Vintners
- ** 2003 Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon, Vineyard Select, Walla Walla Vintners
- ** 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon, Abeja
- ** 2003 The Creator, K Vintners
- ** 2002 Columbia Redeviva, Buty
- ** 2003 Redeviva of the Stones, Buty
- ** 2004 Merlot, Five Star Cellars
- ** 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon, Five Star Cellars
- ** 2004 Cabernet Franc, Tamarack
- ** 2002 DuBrul Reserve, Tamarck
- ** 2003 Seven Hills Reserve, Tamarack
- ** 2003 Cuvee Estate, Cougar Crest
- ** 2003 Estate Syrah, Cougar Crest

Full report in order tasted follows.

Pepper Bridge Winery



Winery: 2 stars, cold environment
Tasting fee: Yes, \$8, can be applied toward purchase
Summary: Pepper Bridge makes very nice overpriced wine.
Where: Pete's

Wines:

- *2003 Merlot:* Green on nose, good tannins, short finish, pepper on nose, good wine, overpriced
- + *2003 Cabernet Sauvignon:* Coffee on the nose, longer finish, vanilla, great nose, good taste; finish very good.

Saviah Cellars



Winery: 3 stars, cute and homey, crowded
Tasting Fee: None
Summary: Saviah Cellars is making some of the best wine at the best price points in the Valley. Their Une Vallee is not to be missed.
Where: Esquin

Wines:

- + *2005 Star Meadow:* Semillion and Sauv Blanc, grapefruit, honeydew
- + *The Jack*
- + *2004 Une Vallee:* Somewhat closed on the nose, less full on taste. Needs time.
- * *2004 Red Mountain Syrah:* Fuller bodied wine

Va Piano Vineyards



Winery: 3 stars, nice Italian-style décor

Tasting fee: Yes, \$5, can be applied toward purchase

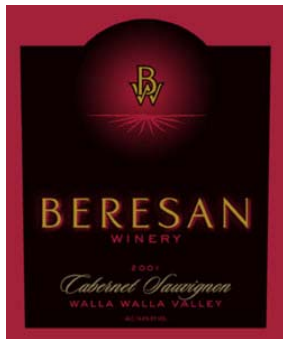
Summary: This will be an interesting winery to watch. Their syrah was some of the most interesting of those tasted.

Where: Leschi

Wines:

- * 2003 Syrah: Excellent nose, green pepper, tangy says Lindy, very good wine
- + 2004 Syrah: Green pepper, very sharp on taste, still needs time but has good body and structure
- 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon: Okay, a little sharp

Beresan



Winery: 2.5 stars, small but cute

Tasting Fee: No

Summary: Beresan is making very fine wine. Their Stone River stands out.

Where: Pete's, City Cellars

Wines:

- 2003 Merlot: Somewhat thin on taste, decent nose, perhaps needs to settle down
- + 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon: Very smooth taste, coffee on nose
- ** 2003 Stone River: Worth getting, to be released in September
- + 2003 Syrah: Classic syrah nose, full wine

Isenhower Winery



Winery: 2 stars, vacuous space, no charm

Tasting Fee: No

Summary: Isenhower is making good wine at great prices. While not spectacular, their value is hard to argue with.

Where: PCC, City Cellars, Esquin

Wines:

- + *2004 Wild Thyme*: Little sharp, nose not too impressive
- + *2004 Red Paintbrush*: Nice nose, still sharp on taste, young
- * *2004 Looking Glass Syrah*: Classic nose, full body, best of bunch so far, blueberry, pepper, great wine for value
- * *2004 Wild Alfalfa*: Hasn't opened up yet but very well put together wine, best of all, a little green pepper

Yellow Hawk



Winery: 3 stars, at winemaker's house, homey and fun; artisan cheeses

Tasting Fee: No

Summary: Yellow Hawk hasn't quite lived up to the promise of their '01 Sangiovese - one of the finest Washington wines of the last five years. Still, their wines are good and their prices are low. We await another gem.

Where: City Cellars

Wines:

- * *2004 Rosato*: Excellent, dry
- + *2003 Sangiovese*: Not as lively as the '01, little dusty
- + *2003 Chandler Reach Sangiovese*: Not as lively on the nose as other
- + *2002 Kick Ass Red*
- + *2004 Barbera*

Whitman



Winery: 3 stars, good setup with 2 rooms, a bar, music and food

Tasting fee: \$5

Summary: A surprise of the bunch. Whitman is making excellent wines across the board.

Where: Esquin, Pete's

Wines:

- + *2002 Cabernet Sauvignon:* Floral and coffee on the nose, a little uneven on the taste
- * *2003 Cabernet Sauvignon:* Much richer, smoother wine, smokey on the nose
- * *2003 Merlot:* Good full wine
- * *2003 Narcissa:* Opens up in the mouth
- * *2002 Narcissa:* Has Bourdeaux funk! Pepper and spice
- * *Cabernet/Merlot Del Rio Future:* Great wine, reminiscent of Yellowhawk Sangiovese

Le' Ecole No. 41



Winery: 3 stars, crowded but pretty

Tasting Fee: No

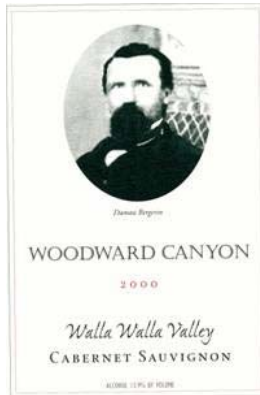
Summary: Le'Ecole continues to make consistently excellent wines. Their quality is so consistent it starts to blend together.

Where: Esquin, Pete's, City Cellars, Seattle Cellars

Wines:

- *2004 Columbia Valley Merlot:* Little green on the nose, good taste, will be a nice wine, caramel
- * *2003 Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon:* Excellent
- *2003 Columbia Valley Syrah*
- * *2004 Seven Hills Estate Syrah:* Will be a great wine
- *2003 Apogee:* Caramel, sharp on taste
- * *2003 Perigee:* Very smooth says Lindy. Too sweet for Pat

Woodward Canyon



Winery: 2 stars, no charm
Tasting Fee: Don't recall
Summary: While old and new timers in the valley continue to sing the praises of this winery, one gets the feeling that it's more for times gone by than times in the future.

Where: Esquin, City Cellars, Pete's

Wines:

- * *Red Table Wine, non-vintage:* Minty, very good for the money
- + *2000 Walla Walla Pinot Noir:* Smokey like syrah, smooth on taste, don't get a bunch of pinot though
- *2003 Artist Series:* Good, not great
- *2003 Old Vines Cabernet Sauvignon:* Overoaked

Reininger



Winery: 3 stars, outdoor space, barrel room

Tasting Fee: No

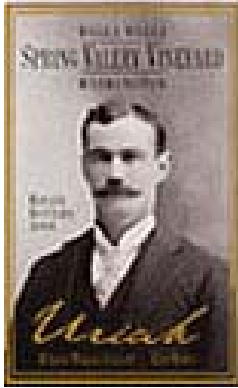
Summary: Reininger's new space is impressive, and his wines continue to be rock solid. Helix as a second label wine is a strong addition – all exceptional values.

Where: City Cellars, Pete's

Wines:

- + *2005 Helix:* To be released in June
- * *2001 Cima:* Nice summer wine but too pricey
- + *2002 Merlot:* Lively nose, full taste
- *2002 Caberbet Sauvignon:* Good nose, a little uneven
- + *2003 Syrah:* Very good, needs to lay down
- * *2003 Helix Merlot:* Very good
- * *2003 Helix Pomatia:* Excellent, great value
- *2001 RTW:* Nose very toasted
- *2003 Helix Syrah*

Spring Valley



Winery: 4 stars, has it all

Tasting Fee: No

Summary: What can I say about Spring Valley? The drive out to the farm is always the highlight of any trip to Walla Walla. They have the perfect American story and the perfect Washington wine. They are currently the standard bearer.

Where: Pete's, Esquin, City Cellars, Leschi

Wines:

- * *2004 Mule Skinner*: Excellent, balanced, full feel in mouth
- * *2004 Uriah*: Blueberry, strong, still needs time to settle down, good tannins
- ** *2003 Frederick*: Stunner
- * *2003 Derby*: Excellent, white pepper, needs age

Couvillion



Winery: 2 stars, nice art, beautiful flowers, pretty location.

Tasting fee: No

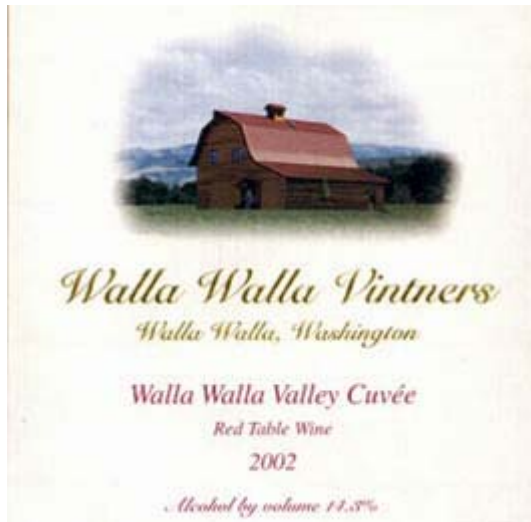
Summary: This is a new winery showing off their first vintage. A product of the local educational programs, the winemaker shows tremendous promise in this, her first release.

Where: Winery

Wines:

- + *2005 Sauvignon Blanc*: Very good
- * *2004 Cabernet Sauvignon*: Delicate, very nice nose, First vintage.
- * *2004 Merlot*

Walla Walla Vintners



Winery: 2.5 stars, nothing special, but a pretty location

Tasting fee: No

Summary: Walla Walla Vintners continues to make extremely high quality wines that all share a common style. They were generous enough to share their select wines with us which are showing tremendous promise six months after their release. You can't go wrong with any of their wines.

Where: Esquin, City Cellars, Pete's

Wines:

- + 2004 Sangiovese: Red cherry, good but a little sweet
- + 2004 Cabernet Franc: Chocolate
- ** 2004 Walla Walla Merlot
- + 2003 Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon: Strong, toasty on nose
- * 2003 Sagemoor Cuvee: Lindy loves the finish, firmer tannins than most WWV wines, could still sit for another year
- ** 2003 Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon, Vineyard Select: Red cherry on nose, this wine has come a long way since I first tasted it; Excellent, the best they make

Abeja



Winery: 3.5 stars, gorgeous place, barrel room, bed and breakfast

Tasting fee: Yes, \$8, can be applied toward purchase

Summary: The winery boasts a stunning location, more resort than winery. Their barrel room had the most charm of any on the trip. The wines stand out as well. Their flagship Cabernet continues to impress.

Where: Pete's

Wines:

- * *2004 Chardonnay*: Butter, nice taste
- * *2004 RTW*: Little green still but good, great value, let sit at least 6 months
- ** *2003 Cabernet Sauvignon*: Longest finish of any wine we've had. White pepper, maybe even too strong on pepper

K Vintners



Winery: 3 stars for entertainment factor, very crowded, rock star atmosphere, for the rebels

Tasting fee: No

Summary: We come to K for the atmosphere. Like we've lucked into some backstage passes to the eonophile rock show. The wines are always interesting. The names always curious. Unfortunately, the prices are always a little high.

Where: Pete's, City Cellars, Esquin

Wines:

- + *House Wine:* Spice, great value for the money, sharp on finish
- + *2004 Milbrandt:* Blueberry, toast, very good
- * *2004 The Boy:* Toast, flint, lychee, too spendy though
- * *2003 Lucky # 7:* Great nose, sharp taste, needs lots of time.
- ** *2003 The Creator:* Cab with Syrah. Excellent, too bad so spendy

Buty



Winery: 1 star, small room with no atmosphere

Tasting Fee: No

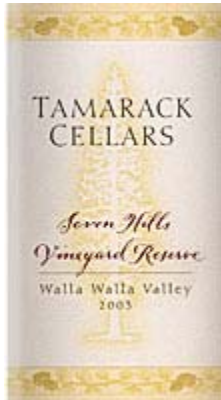
Summary: The location is nothing special but the wine continues to be. The Redeviva of the Stones is exceptional.

Where: Larry's

Wines:

- + *2004 Semillion:* Honeydew, grapefruit
- ** *2002 Columbia Redeviva:* Anise, very good, great nose, long finish
- ** *2003 Redeviva of the Stones:* Pineapple, long finish

Tamarack Cellars



Winery: 2 stars, nothing special, open space, bar

Tasting Fee: Yes, \$5 for reserve tasting

Summary: Tamarack is making consistently high quality wines. You'll want to spend the money to try their reserves though which clearly live up to the designation. High quality, low production wines that will be excellent for years to come.

Where: Larry's, Esquin

Wines:

- + 2004 Sangiovese: Going to be a nice wine
- 2004 Firehouse Red: Toast, chocolate, sharp, needs cheese
- * 2003 Merlot: Mocha, coffee, good but a little short on finish
- + 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon: Great nose, like merlot but a little better, little fuller
- + 2002 Syrah: Fullest wine of the bunch
- ** 2004 Cabernet Franc: 70 cases made, superb, coffee, rich
- ** 2002 DuBrul Reserve: Great, full
- ** 2003 Seven Hills Reserve: 24 cases made, great, smooth
- * 2003 Sagemoor Reserve: very smooth, subdued of the reserves

Five Star Cellars



Winery: 2 stars, okay, wine bar, Costco food

Tasting Fee: Yes, \$5, can be applied toward purchase

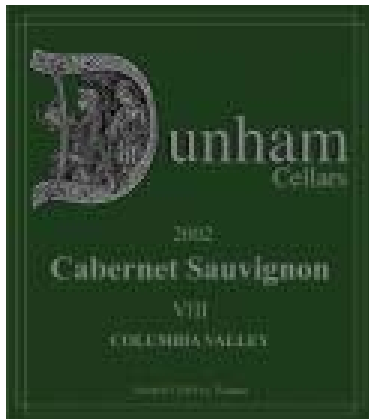
Summary: Boy, with the Costco food, it's clear that this winery is not spending their money to try to impress on the chow. However, their wines have all been exceptional the last several years and continue to be. Just plan on nibbling elsewhere.

Where: Esquin, City Cellars

Wines:

- * 2004 Syrah: Good, up front, doesn't feel like syrah to me
- ** 2004 Merlot: Needs time, will be a good wine though
- ** 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon: Will be a great wine

Dunham Cellars



Winery: 3 stars, lots of charm, too bad the wines aren't better

Tasting Fee: Yes, \$5

Summary: Dunham has long been revered in the valley for their Cabernet and Syrah. However, with prices going up and the quality seeming to go down, this is a winery that needs to find its soul again.

Where: Esquin

Wines:

- + 2003 Trutina: Good table wine, needs cheese
- 2005 Rose: Great nose, over-oaked on taste
- + 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, VIII: Good but sharp on the oak
- * 2003 Syrah: Nice wine, good nose, full taste

Cougar Crest



Winery: 2 stars, no charm, small

Tasting Fee: Yes, \$5

Summary: This is a winery on the way up. All of the wines are excellent and the syrahs are truly spectacular.

Where: Pete's, Esquin

Wines:

- + 2005 Viognier: Honeydew, citrus, Asian pear, grapefruit on nose
- + 2002 Estate Merlot: Smoke, full taste, black cherry on nose, blackberry taste
- + 2002 Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon, Estate: Cherry on nose and taste
- ** 2003 Cuvee Estate: Coffee, still young, big mouth feel, cherry, reminiscent of Walla Walla Vintners
- ** 2003 Estate Syrah: Classic, plum
- * 2002 Estate Reserve Syrah: Good, more up front than 2003, strong nose
- . 2003 Estate Port

Russell Creek



Winery: 2 stars, owner was fantastic

Tasting Fee: Yes, \$5

Summary: Russell Creek distinguishes itself by crafting single varietal wines. No blending here. It shows off all the beauty, as well as all the flaws of the respective grapes.

Where: Esquin

Wines:

- * 2004 Syrah: Rough on nose, great on taste, 16% alcohol
- * 2001 Merlot
- * 2002 Merlot
- * 2002 Merlot Select
- . 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon: Caramel
- . 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Select
- . 2004 Sangiovese: Pepper and spice