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Wednesday, March 23, 2005 - Page updated at 06:13 p.m

Information in this article, originally published March 16, was corrected March 23. The Kana Winery 2002 Dark Star Elerding Vineyard wine retails at \$20 a bottle, not \$35.

Wine Adviser / Paul Gregutt

## Unearthing rare gems in the state



Looking to discover some off-the-radar rising stars, I recently did a blind tasting of several dozen new Washington wines, arranged in peer groups by blend or varietal.

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Ten stood out, and I profiled five of them in last week's column; the rest follow below. As pleasing as it is to unearth some rare gem from a new and unknown winery, you will inevitably encounter failures and disappointments along the way.

I'm not trying to rain on anyone's parade. Heck, I'm leading this parade. The wineries profiled here have given every indication of being committed to quality, knowledgeable about their vineyard choices and winemaking decisions, and dedicated to fulfilling the rigorous demands of the wine trade.

Just remember, for consumers there are risks as well as rewards when purchasing limited-availability wines from untested producers. Prices tend to be a bit steep. It's almost always a losing proposition financially to start a new winery, and if you're doing it on a shoestring, watching the bills roll in while your inventory just sits there, you have to charge a price that will at least keep you solvent.

But just because a winery is small and pricey is no guarantee of quality. There was no shortage of flawed wines in my tasting, with off aromas, bacterial problems, high levels of alcohol, high pH, etc.

When a winery is brand new, and making just a few hundred cases of wine, its wines may sell out anyway. But over the long term, overpriced wines that are unreliable at best will have trouble finding buyers. Even avid treasure hunters want to find value for their dollars.

Even when the winemaking is sound, tiny wineries are handicapped in other ways. They have chronic shortages of manpower, time and equipment.

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Bottle variation (some bottles are very good, some not so good) is a common problem. Something as simple as labeling can be a nightmare. One young winemaker recently described to me how the labels on his first batch of wine had bad glue and had to be cleaned off, the bottles scraped, and re-labeled; a laborious, weeks-long chore. Another winemaker, trying to give his bottles a hand-dipped faux wax seal, found that the product he was using smelled.

These wineries, for the most part, do not have track records. There is always the possibility that they had a bit of beginner's luck with the first vintage or two. Can they maintain quality year after year, in all types of vintages? There are no for-sure answers, but I look for steady improvement, even in wineries that are still in their first few vintages.

Bottom line: Taste before you buy! Wine shops love to bring in new winemakers for free tastings. Larger events, such as Taste Washington (April 8-10) also include a wide variety of wine tastings, seminars and many opportunities to sample new wines. For more information on Taste Washington, visit [www.tastewashington.org](http://www.tastewashington.org), or call 206-667-9463, ext. 200.

I've listed phone numbers and/or Web site information for all the wineries recommended here. They all have open mailing lists, which are a great way to get advance word of new releases, and invitations to special events at the winery. Remember also that there are many wine shops — too many to list — scattered throughout the Puget Sound region that specialize in Washington boutiques and will be able to order these wines for you.

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### **Boudreaux Cellars 2002 Cabernet "Seven Hills" (\$40)**

The winemaker bio for Boudreaux Cellars reads, "Rob Newson has survived a paragliding crash, a flaming helicopter evacuation and having his tent avalanche-launched off a 4,000-foot alpine wall. He's battled hypothermia, oxygen deprivation and 85-mph winds during his 20+ years as a world-class alpinist. Nowadays he makes wine for a living."

Being "avalanche-launched" is a pretty good description of Newsom's wines, which are powerfully built. A fishing friendship with Leonetti's Gary Figgins led not only to a midlife career change, but also to some rarified grape sources and perhaps a tip or two about making wine, Leonetti-style. Boudreaux Cellars has made just a smattering of vintages, but among the small-lot releases of semillon, chardonnay, sangiovese, syrah, merlot and cab have been some meaty masterpieces.

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The 2002 "Seven Hills " cabernet (just 80 cases were made) is at the top of the list. Plenty ripe, it revels in the fresh, strawberry preserve flavors of its great Walla Walla fruit, marinated in a mix of American and French oak barrels for added spice and substance.

To get on the Boudreaux mailing list or arrange a visit to the winery, call 509-548-5858, or visit online: [www.boudreauxcellars.com](http://www.boudreauxcellars.com)

### **Doyenne 2002 Syrah (\$43)**

Wait a minute! Doyenne is no mini-boutique; it's the syrah from DeLille Cellars. Yes, but now it is a separate entity, spiffed up in a gorgeous new package and bottled in a piece of glass heavy enough to put a hole in the Titanic. The wine is a bruiser, tight and chewy, with heavy tannins and an abundance of dark, roasted, espresso flavors. Just 900 cases were produced. Contact: 425-402-9295, or visit online: [www.delillecellars.com](http://www.delillecellars.com)

### **Kana 2002 "Dark Star" (\$20)**

Kana opened the day after Thanksgiving in Yakima 2004, with a tasting room in the historic Larson building. Three wines were released, and this Dark Star is the flagship. It's a Rhone Ranger-style blend: 50 percent mourvèdre, 40 percent syrah and 10 percent counoise (a peppery, southern French red wine grape), all from the Elerding vineyard, one of this state's best. Balanced, bright and freshly fruity, this is a lighter, food-friendly red. Contact: 509-453-6611. E-mail: [kanawinery@aol.com](mailto:kanawinery@aol.com)

### **Mark Ryan 2002 "Dead Horse" (\$38)**

Though I'm not especially fond of the name, I've admired Mark McNeilly's wines for the past couple of vintages. He has already found a consistent niche for his Dead Horse and Long Haul reds, which are made in mirror-image styles from Ciel du Cheval (Red Mountain) grapes.

The Dead Horse (the name is a play on Horse Heaven, as in the hills which can be seen from the vineyard) is the cabernet-dominated wine, a big, lush, full-bodied Bordeaux blend. The Long Haul, a right bank, merlot/cab franc blend, seems to show more heat, more oak and broader shoulders.

Contact: 206-910-7967. Web site: [www.markryanwinery.com](http://www.markryanwinery.com)

### **SYZYG 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$28)**

I met Zach Brettler and Kelsey Harmon at SYZYG (sizz-uh-jee) last spring. One of the micro-boutiques clustered at the Walla Walla airport, SYZYG made just three wines in 2002, the first commercial vintage.

This cabernet is the last to be released, and it continues the winning streak initiated by SYZYG's 2002 syrah and 2002 red wine. It's 100 percent cabernet, made from Conner Lee, Charbonneau and Pepper Bridge fruit.

Though not a blockbuster, it is very well-made, with clean fruit, good balance, a smooth entry and a pleasing, moderately extended finish. The odd name is an astronomical term for the straight line configuration of the sun, the moon and the Earth. Contact: 509-522-0484. Web site: [www.szygywines.com](http://www.szygywines.com)

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