The Horse Heaven Hills AVA is one of Washington’s largest grape regions with a reputation earned for powerfully structured wines that are gracefully balanced.

HE HORSE HEAVEN HILLS is an American Viticultural Area (AVA) that sprawls across a windswept plateau 50 miles long and 20 miles wide in southeast Washington. It is a wine grape grower’s paradise—long dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon—yet home to a surprising number of red and white varieties that produce excellent results.

The region’s nearly 12,000 acres of vineyards account for one fourth of the state’s total vines. But it’s not the quantity that makes grapes from here so incredibly sought after, but rather the quality. There’s a distinctive graceful power behind the wines that some describe as a symmetry between Old World styles and modern winemaking. It summed up in a single word, it might be “balance.”

“The fruit is so well-balanced that winemakers tell me they stand back and let the wine make itself,” says grower Paul Champoux, referring to the distinctiveness of the terroir. He’s been managing the 190-acre world famous Champoux Vineyards since 1989, of which two-thirds are planted to Cabernet.

“Cabernet will always be king at this vineyard and probably the whole AVA,” he says. “I do have nine other varieties at this vineyard; a couple of stars that don’t get enough credit would be the Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Malbec.”

The Mercer family, who has been farming in the Horse Heaven Hills for four generations, planted the first wine grapes here in 1972. Today they are one of the top ten growers in terms of vineyard size.

“i've always felt like the horse heaven hills offered a distinctive bright tone to the front palate with balanced, elegant dusty tannins on the finish,” says Mercer ranch president Rob Mercer, describing characteristics of his Cabernet and Merlot.

Andrews believes these attributes may come from a combination of the soil and other factors. “Most will tell you the wind is what makes the Horse Heaven AVA unique. I think it is the soil and climate,” he suggests. “I think the velvet mouthfeel comes from the uniqueness of the soil, especially the silt and ash components. Secondly, it is the long growing season, and how and when the growing degrees are accumulated. This allows for the complete ripeness of the grapes, giving those big dark fruit flavors.”

The majority of Andrews’ 1,135-acre vineyard is Cabernet and while he admits this varietal will continue to be the AVA leader, he is optimistic about others as well. To date he has planted 26 different varietals and only pulled out one that he felt didn’t perform up to standards.

“The Bordeaux varieties have all done very well,” says Andrews. “The Rhône varieties have quickly gained popularity and deservingly so because of the intense fruit flavors and body.” He further cites success with both red and white Iberian varietals in his vineyard, notably Albarino, Tempranillo and Graciano.

“i don’t want to miss the Italian varietals. Sangiovese and Primitivo both seem to have adapted well to our vineyard and are producing some very popular award-winning wines.”

The downward sloping vineyard in the foreground is Mercer’s “Matt’s Vineyard” named after Bud Mercer whose real name was Milton Jr. The vineyard to the left is Phinny Hill Vineyard and across the road is Champoux Vineyard.
McKinley Springs Vineyard 2010 Malbec
www.mckinleysprings.com
sourced from the family owned and operated 2,000-acre estate vineyard and aged 18 months in a combination of French and American oak.

Nose:
aromas of black and red fruit, black olive, tobacco, spice and smoke accents.

Taste:
Brawny and bold with powerful dark flavors of blackberry, plum skin, caramel, mocha, and cedar. Minerally-driven tannins on the finish.

$24

Madsen Family Cellars 2010 McKinley Springs Petit Verdot
www.madsenfamilycellars.com
The Olympia-based winery’s owner/winemaker Dana Madsen sourced hand-picked fruit for this wine.

Nose:
Dusky aromas of dark fruit, red currant, rose petals, cedar box and dried savory herbs. Taste: Rich and dense with bold, textured tannins and a sheen of polished minerality that glides along dark, brooding flavors of blackberry, black plum sauce, black currant and licorice.

$30

Martinez & Martinez 2011 César Red Wine
www.martinezwine.com
Only 150 cases were produced of this Cabernet-based proprietary blend from the boutique winery run by the Martinez family. Nose: Aromas of dark red fruit and blueberry accented with vanilla and graphite. Taste: Generous and round with ripe black cherry, dark plum, blueberry, currant, mocha and spice notes. Seamless and well balanced with integrated tannins.

$22

Madsen Family Cellars 2010 McKinley Springs Petit Verdot
www.madsenfamilycellars.com
The Olympia-based winery’s owner/winemaker Dana Madsen sourced hand-picked fruit for this wine.

Nose:
Dusky aromas of dark fruit, red currant, rose petals, cedar box and dried savory herbs. Taste: Rich and dense with bold, textured tannins and a sheen of polished minerality that glides along dark, brooding flavors of blackberry, black plum sauce, black currant and licorice.

$30

Mercer Estates 2013 Reserve Chardonnay
www.mercerwine.com
100% of the grapes for this Reserve Chardonnay come from Zephyr Ridge Vineyard in the AVA. Nose: Exotic aromas of guava, apricot, honeydew, beeswax, lemon crème fraîche, toast and sugar cane root. Taste: Pure, balanced and restrained with elegant creamy texture and rich depth. Seamless flavors of dried apricot, Tuscan melon, pineapple and lemon rind with accents of Marcona almonds, honeysuckle and vanilla.

$32

Robert Ramsay Cellars 2012 McKinley Springs Syrah
www.robertramsaycellars.com
A unique wine grape vinted by Woodinville winemaker Bob Harris. Nose: Glorious aromas of wild strawberry, rose petals, puff pastry and mineral spice. Taste: Lush, polished and pure with silky tannins and crushed pebble minerality that rises up mid-palate. There’s energy and depth to the mix of strawberry, white cherry and wild berry fruit with spice notes on the finish.

$32

Chateau Ste. Michelle 2009 Canoe Ridge Estate Syrah
www.ste-michelle.com
The estate vineyard lies on a steep, windswept south-facing slope on the bank of the Columbia River. The 2009 growing season was ideal. Nose: Tantalizing dark fruit and earthy aromas of fig, raisin and warm spices. Taste: Complex, supple and structured with fine tannins. Harmonious rich flavors of red cherry and blueberry spiced with lavender, chai, coffee bean and grilled game on the finish.

$35

H/H Estates 2010 Michael Andrews Red Reserve
www.coyotecanyonwinery.com
This reserve-tier Coyote Canyon Vineyard wine is a blend of Mike Andrews’s estate-grown Tempranillo and Graciano. Nose: Appealing aromas of dark red fruit with currant, tobacco, leather, sweet spice and mineral notes. Taste: Smooth, lively and dense with juicy rich flavors of dark cherry, savoy cranberry sauce and juniper berries, loading to complex tobacco, caramel, and mineral spice on the finish.

$38

Canoe Ridge Vineyard 2011 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon
www.canoeridgevineyard.com
This reserve wine was sourced from some of the oldest Cabernet blocks in this estate vineyard that stretches along the shores of the Columbia River. Nose: Soft aromas of red and black berries, tobacco leaf, tar and lightly toasted oak. Taste: Lively and bright with flavors of cherry, red currant, lavender, herbal spice and vanilla accents. Firm tannins push through the finish.

$20

Martinez & Martinez 2011 César Red Wine
www.martinezwine.com
Only 150 cases were produced of this Cabernet-based proprietary blend from the boutique winery run by the Martinez family. Nose: Aromas of dark red fruit and blueberry accented with vanilla and graphite. Taste: Generous and round with ripe black cherry, dark plum, blueberry, currant, mocha and spice notes. Seamless and well balanced with integrated tannins.

$22
Darby Winery 2011 Discovery Vineyard Syrah
www.darbywinery.com
Woodinville winemaker Darby English sourced this fruit from Discovery Vineyard managed by Paul Champoux. Nose: Macerated berries, coffee with bittersweet chocolate shavings, violet, cigar box. Taste: Well-sculpted with intense depth and loads of exotic flavors. Dark blackberry coulis, black tea, fresh garden peppers and pencil shavings framed with minerality and fine-acidity. $42

Gamache Vintners 2009 Heritage Reserve Cabernet Franc
www.gamachevintners.com
Woodinville winemaker Darby English sourced this fruit from Discovery Vineyard and Champoux Vineyard, in this elegant limited release wine. Nose: Aromas of red raspberry, red currant, cherry, tobacco leaf, cedar box, vanilla bean. Taste: Suave, silky and expressive with elegant tannins on a seamless front of rich red berries, espresso and loamy earth. Finishes long and satisfying. $42.50

Robert Karl 2010 Horse Heaven Hills Inspiration Cabernet Sauvignon
www.robertkarl.com
Joe and Rebecca Gunselman have strong ties to the AVA at their estate vineyard, Gunselman Bench. Nose: Fragrant aromatics of red and black fruit with black plum, pomegranate, leather, vanilla and spice. Taste: There’s a gorgeous streak of crushed rock minerality driving pure fruit flavors of blackberry, raspberry, currants, licorice and sage. Polished and high-toned with well-integrated tannins, structure and balance. $45

Den Hoed 2009 Andreas Cabernet Sauvignon
www.denhoedwines.com
A shining example of pure Cabernet from Wallula Vineyard. Nose: Opulent aromas of black and red fruit, black currant, leather and fresh savory herbs. Taste: Sophistication and elegance define this powerful structured Cab displaying enormity of depth with richly concentrated blackberry, black cherry, cassis, fig and hints of anise. Ultra polished tannins linger effortlessly on the long finish. $80

Maryhill Winery 2011 Alder Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon
www.maryhillwinery.com
Maryhill’s Vineyard Series small lot Cabernet is aged 20 months in 60% new French oak. Nose: Dusky aromas of cherry, red plum, sassafras, caramel and graphite. Taste: Rich and supple with a bright beam of red fruit framed with firm structure and chewy tannins. Accents of red currant, mocha, spice and pencil shavings persist on the finish. $40

Soos Creek 2010 Champoux Vineyard Red Wine
www.sooscreekwine.com
Winemaker/owner David Larsen sourced his Bordeaux-style blend from five blocks of Cabernet with a touch of Cab Franc and Merlot. Nose: Blackberry, plum, tart red berry, mulled spices, sandalwood. Taste: Vibrant and pure with taut tannins and bold complex layers of blackberry, Italian plum, red currant, mulberry, bay leaf and white pepper spice wrapping up the finish. $40

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www.robertkarl.com
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Andrew Will 2011 Champoux Vineyard Sorella
www.andrewwill.com
Fruit from vines averaging 35 years old was used in this Bordeaux style blend. Nose: Beguiling aromas of earthen minerality tinged with blue and red fruit, lavender, dried herbs, graphite. Taste: Artfully balanced with intense focus and a visceral edge to the complex earthy flavors backed by a tower of plush textural tannins. Concentrated and restrained with a sheen of minerality that pushes on endlessly. $84