



## Kevin Pogue

### on Walla Walla Valley Syrah

*interviewed by Elaine Chukan Brown*

“What excites me about syrah in Walla Walla is that you can truly taste the differences between wines made not very far apart. Within ten miles, you have these sites that differ in terms of heat units, elevation, soil—whatever element you want to use to talk about terroir,” says Kevin Pogue, a geologist at Whitman College in the town of Walla Walla. As the local wine industry has taken off, Pogue has used his research on topography and soil types to scout out interesting new vineyard sites for his consulting clients. He’s particularly taken with syrah, and even grows a few syrah vines in his backyard. “Walla Walla is a great lab for seeing terroir expression in syrah,” he finds, “and syrah is such a great terroir-driven grape.”

Pogue wrote the proposal for The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater at the southernmost part of Walla Walla Valley. Approved in 2015, The Rocks, as growers here call it, is one of the most uniformly soil-based appellations in the country. The area is filled with baseball-sized basalt cobbles reminiscent of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, deposited over centuries by the Walla Walla River. The cobbles run to depths of more than 600 feet.

More broadly, Walla Walla hosts a preponder-

ance of loess, a windblown silt bonded together loosely by calcium carbonate. It’s a dusty soil that’s relatively easy to plant and farm. Underneath the loess, some vineyards sit on basalt bedrock, others on sedimentary soils created by the ancient, massive Missoula floods. In some places these three soil types—silty loess, sedimentary sand and pebbles, and volcanic basalt—mix.

Pogue picked six wines to represent the differing terroirs of Walla Walla Valley.



**1 Reynvaan In the Hills Syrah** “In Walla Walla, the higher the elevation, the cooler it is, and the more acidity you have in the syrah,” Pogue explains. Looking to cultivate syrah in cooler climates, the Reynvaan family planted the Foothills in the Sun vineyard in 2007 at 1,600 feet of elevation in deep silt loam soil. The site’s diurnal shifts and cooler overall temperatures result in vibrant acidity in the grapes. Unlike most of Walla Walla, Foothills in the Sun (in the foothills of the Blue Mountains) gets enough rain to sustain the vines without irrigation. The rest of the valley sits in a rain shadow. “The wine is beautiful, complex and peppery. It has more spice and herbs to it than the others—there’s a lot of complexity and that comes from the elevation. It doesn’t get as hot during the day and with the natural rainfall the vines are less stressed.”

**2 Spring Valley Vineyard Nina Lee Syrah** Northeast of the town of Walla Walla, Spring Valley grows syrah at 1,550 feet of elevation. Though the elevation is similar to Foothills in the Sun, this northern stretch of the appellation receives far less rainfall. “This vineyard is really dry, with loess soils on top of basalt. It used to be all rolling hills of wheat.” Thanks to the elevation and the wind, the site gets cool at night, but it can get quite hot during the day. As a result, the wine retains its acidity, but thanks to the warmer daytime temperatures, it’s a little less peppery and herbal than Reynvaan. “Early on at Spring Valley, they used to let the fruit hang a long time—until mid-November—to let it get as ripe as possible and to make jammy wines. Now that they’re picking it earlier, the flavors are more herbal, with that peppery syrah character. Its complexity comes from the elevation.”

**3 L’Ecole N° 41 Seven Hills Vineyard Estate Syrah** Pogue calls this “classic Washington syrah.” It’s one of the oldest syrah plantings in Walla Walla, dating to the mid-1990s. The southernmost of these six sites, the vineyard rises to 960 feet on a slope of windblown loess deposited over Missoula flood sediments of sand and gravel. Though Seven Hills sits just across the border on the Oregon side of Walla Walla Valley, its combination of loess soils and low rainfall is typical of many Washington vineyards. “It tastes like clean, bright red fruit—raspberries and dried cherries—with a little bit of spice and white pepper. It has pretty good acid and plenty of tannin.” Pogue finds the L’Ecole has the most approachable flavors, but a structure that needs time in the bottle to fully reveal itself.

**4 Delmas Syrah** “Seven Hills and Delmas are less than a mile apart, but the wines are so different they almost taste like different grapes,” Pogue says. “Their contrast is one of my favorite examples of terroir.” Delmas owns and farms the SJR Vineyard in The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, only a mile north of Seven Hills. The site is planted at 840 feet of elevation over a deep deposit of basalt-based gravel and cobblestones. “The subzone is alluvial gravel that’s fundamentally different from the other places,” says Pogue. The dark basalt stones absorb heat from the sun over the course of the day and then slowly release it at night. The result is a slightly higher pH in the wines compared to Seven Hills and a more supple tannin profile, and a savage, meaty character. “Delmas is a fabulous expression of Rocks terroir with beautiful perfume. The heat from the dark basalt cobbles bakes herbalness out of the wine. It tastes of tapenade, bacon and earthiness.”

**5 Gramercy Cellars Forgotten Hills Syrah** “Forgotten Hills is a mix of alluvial soils from Cottonwood Creek with classic Missoula floodplains sedimentary soils. So it’s silty, with scattered pebbles—but not all rock,” Pogue says. “The site is slightly lower in elevation, at 940 feet [less than a mile from Les Collines on the eastern side of the valley]. It is full of basalt but isn’t as hot as The Rocks or Spring Valley. It tends to have lower acidity [than most of the other wines] but it has beautifully integrated tannins. There is this pepperiness, but with other stuff going on to counter that. It is wonderfully complex, and has a broader range of flavors than the other wines. There is an elementary perfume and the ultimate mixture of peppery syrah with a funky earthiness, smoky tar and bacon fat.”

**6 Amavi Les Collines Vineyard Syrah** “Les Collines is slightly lower in elevation and a bit more removed from the Blue Mountains than Reynvaan, so it’s a slightly drier site. It gets cooler at night and not as hot during the day as some of the other sites,” Pogue says. “It also has slightly older vines,” planted at the start of the 2000s at around 1,250 feet of elevation on silty loam. Pogue saw a change in character on the wines coming from Les Collines as the vines matured. “When the vines got to be seven or eight years old, the wines got more dark fruit, with a meatier component. It sort of made me a believer in deep roots having an impact on the wines.” Pogue sees Les Collines as a balance of the earthy, savage notes found in wines from the basalt cobbles of The Rocks with the classic Washington red fruit character born of the loess soils seen in L’Ecole. “Les Collines offers a blend of The Rocks earthiness on top of a framework of classic Washington syrah,” Pogue finds. “It’s a slightly fruitier style where the earthier, bacon fat character still starts to come in with some funkier aromatics, but it doesn’t slap you in the face. It’s one of the more approachable wines structurally, but with complex flavors.” ■