



Amy Alvarez-Wampfler, co-winemaker at Abeja in Walla Walla, was in charge of 10,000 barrels of chardonnay during her time at Columbia Crest. (Abeja)

This month, raise a toast to region's Hispanic winemakers

From fields to tasting rooms, they play a vitally important role in the Northwest wine industry.

The recent rise of the Hispanic winemaker in the Pacific Northwest provides appropriate depth to the circle that begins in the vineyard and ends with wines that earn acclaim and promote tourism to our region.

During the course of four weeks, from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, the U.S. will toast Hispanic Heritage Month, a celebration and sign of respect that began with President Lyndon B. Johnson as a week and was expanded two decades later by Ronald Reagan in 1988.

In our corner of the country, it syncs up with the harvest of grapes by vineyard workers and the crushing of grapes by winemakers. In a growing number of scenarios, the important decisions, starting with when to bring in the fruit, are being made in the cellar by Hispanic winemakers.

No one in the region is responsible for more wine than Juan Muñoz-Oca, executive vice-president of winemaking, vineyards and operations for Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. The native of Argentina, whose resume includes a business degree from Columbia University in New York, began his career in Washington state as a viticulturist in 2001 at Columbia Crest. The team he was on produced the vaunted Columbia Crest 2005 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon that was Wine Spectator's No. 1 wine in the world for 2009.

A decade later, Wine Press Northwest magazine selected Palencia Wine Co., led by Mexican-born Victor Palencia, as the 2019 Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year. Palencia grew up in the Yakima Valley, inspired by his father who tended vines.

Another thing that several of these winemakers have in common is their alma mater — Walla Walla Community College and its highly decorated Institute of Enology & Viticulture program. The list of products includes Palencia, Amy Alvarez-Wampfler of Abeja in Walla Walla, Christopher Castillo of Castillo de Feliciano Vineyard & Winery in Milton-Freewater, Oregon, and Victor De la Luz of Gordon Estate/De la Luz Wine.

Below are a few of the wines produced by these winemakers that have earned a gold medal in a recent judging. Ask for these wines at your favorite wine shop or contact the wineries directly.

Abeja 2018 Chardonnay, Washington State, \$45: Alvarez-Wampfler met her husband, Daniel, while they were working at Columbia Crest, where Amy's focus was on the chardonnay program. At Abeja, where she and Daniel Wampfler share the winemaking duties, her touch with chardonnay remains on display. This blend of grapes from select cooler sites across the state such as Celilo, Conner Lee and Abeja's plantings along Mill Creek in the Walla Walla Valley offers finesse with notes of light butterscotch, dusty Bosc Pear, lemon bar and vanilla. Delicious acidity emerges from the nine months in 40% new oak barrels with the finish of crushed pineapple and apricot compote.