

BANG FOR THE BUCK ON WAHLUKE SLOPE

With his Luke brand, Thomas Vogeles looks to make a name for a little-known appellation

Red Mountain and Walla Walla are the stars of Columbia Valley, but this large winegrowing region also includes 11 smaller American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). Thomas Vogeles believes one of those AVAs, Wahluke Slope, is overdue for a little love.

"Wahluke Slope is producing some very nice wines and I thought it was time to plant a flag there," says Vogeles, whose Luke label focuses exclusively on the region. Vogeles is not alone in his affection for Wahluke. Producers such as Milbrandt, Fielding Hills, Januik and K Vintners bottle wines from there too.

With Luke, Vogeles is not only highlighting the untapped potential of Wahluke Slope but also the value the region offers compared with more high-profile appellations in Columbia Valley. The three current Luke releases retail for \$25 a bottle and rated very good to outstanding on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale.

Luke Cabernet Sauvignon Wahluke Slope 2016 (91 points) is refined but big in structure, buoyed by expressive currant, espresso and savory spice flavors. At more than 8,000 cases, the Cabernet is the most widely distributed of the wines. There's also Luke Merlot Wahluke Slope 2016 (90), a zesty and approachable red, with cherry, coffee bean and spice notes, and Luke Syrah Wahluke Slope 2016 (88), which is sturdy and focused, with medium-bodied currant and tarragon elements.

Wahluke Slope, as Vogeles sees it, is a gem that's just being uncovered. Approved in 2006, the area encompasses more than 80,000 acres, with about a tenth of that area planted to vines. Like grapes from California's Paso Robles region, Wahluke Slope grapes are often used in blends with little or no acknowledgment of their source on the label.

What distinguishes Wahluke (a Native American word for "watering place") is geography and *terroir*. Located about 40 miles north of the Tri-Cities, the hub of Columbia Valley, the slope faces south at a gradual 8% grade, part of an alluvial fan from the Saddle Mountains to the north. The Columbia River forms a border shaped like a lazy oxbow to the west and south. With most vineyards situated between 800 and 1,100 feet of elevation, it has one of the warmest and driest climates in the state; that, combined with frequent windy conditions, creates a buffer against frost and Washington's occasional hard freezes.

Vogeles, a Seattle native, spent most of his career selling wine for Trinchero, Gallo and Michael Mondavi, but he makes Luke himself at Wahluke Wine Company, a custom-crush facility in Mattawa. Peter Devison is his winemaking consultant. Wines are aged in a mix of French and American oak barrels, about 20% new.

Production in 2017 was about 16,000 cases, and Vogeles added a reserve Cabernet and Syrah, as well as a Chardonnay, in 2018. "I want to help evangelize Wahluke Slope," he says. "It has a tremendous potential for growth." —T.F.



Above: The Wahluke Slope AVA comprises roughly 8,000 acres of vines, planted mainly to Washington standbys Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Below: Luke founder Thomas Vogeles

