

Question 3

Describe the differences in wine production between Oregon and Washington with reference to the following factors:

Geography and climate (40% weighting)

Soils (10% weighting)

Grape varieties (30% weighting)

Industry structure (20% weighting)

Answer

Geography and climate

Oregon: lies between California state and Washington state, around the 45th parallel. Most of the vineyards are located in the north western part of the state, in the Willamette Valley (especially in the Dundee Hills and Ribbon Ridge AVAs), going about 200 km south from Portland. However, there are also growing in importance areas in the south of the state, like Applegate, Rouge Valley and Red Hills Douglas County. Most of the vineyards lie near to Pacific Ocean, which strongly influences the climate, making it cool maritime. There is a range of mountains/hills between the Willamette Valley and the Pacific, called Coast Range, however, these mountains are not high enough (and with many breaks) to keep away the maritime influences that bring clouds and rain. Fortunately, most of the rain falls in the months between October and April, making most of the growing season relatively dry. Main risk are with the rain around the flowering which can impact bunch formation and can lead to decreasing the yields; and rain during harvest, which can make the swallow the water and dilute the flavours. Even though the region has maritime climate it had a number of years where drought was a problem, e.g. vintages 2000-2005 these cases irrigation might be needed to support the vines. Winters are mild and wet.

Most of the vineyards in the Willamette Valley are planted on the west side of the Willamette River, on the slopes of the Coast Range, on elevation between 170-330 meters above sea level.

Washington: lies north from Oregon and can be divided into 2 areas: western and eastern. Western produces only about 1% of the wines, it is cool and wet. Eastern part, much more important, is located east from the Cascade mountains. And these mountains play key role in the climate of the Washington region. Even though Washington state is located on the western coast of the USA and on the 46.6 parallel, it has semi-desert conditions with hot summer and cold winters. The Cascade mountains protects the area to the west from the clouds and the rain, they basically stop the clouds from moving to the east. As a result Columbia Valley gets only around 300 mm of rain every year, which can be not enough for the vines, hence, irrigation is crucial in this part of the state (Columbia River and its tributaries are a source of the irrigation water). On the other hand, the winters can be very cold, with the temperature dropping under -15 degrees C (in 2017 it was even -20 degrees), which can be very dangerous for many vines (e.g. popular in that region Merlot is very susceptible to low temperatures). In order to fight that, the growers plant vineyards on slopes with good air drainage - this way the cool air can flow down the hill leaving the warmer air at the level of the vineyard. Also smudge pots and windmills are used to either heat up the air or move the cold air. Many growers also use open trellising in order to encourage air flow and discourage frost settling down on the vines.


There are also AVAs which lie in both states, e.g. the Columbia Gorge which lies closer to the Willamette Valley and the Walla Walla AVA which lies to the east from the Columbia Valley (there is an important AVA on the Oregon side, called Rocks AVA).


Soils

Oregon: there are 2 main soil types in Oregon, the one in the Willamette Valley is called Jory and it is a clay-like loam, which is rich in iron. In the south of the state the soil is called Willakenzie.


Washington: the soil in the Washington is a result of an ancient floods, it can have many layers and be of different type. The topsoils is usually composed of sand and/or silt. The subsoils can be basalt, limestone, volcanic or clay. The sand plays important role as it helps keep phylloxera away and many vines are still not grafted in these vineyards.


Grape varieties:

Oregon: The main grape variety of Oregon is Pinot Noir, which takes about 60% of all the plantings. It produces wines with bright fruit, red berries and cherries aromas and fresh cut field mushrooms. Pinot Noir became the flagship grape after the famous event of 1979 when the Eyrie Vineyard Pinot Noir was an international competition winner with French Pinot Noirs. Other important grapes are: Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Gewurztraminer. In the south of the state Tempranillo and Syrah found their homes as well. 

Washington: for many years the main grape of Washington was Merlot, especially after a documentary movie published in the 1990s about the „French paradox“, which talked about the good effects of drinking red wines. Recently other grapes started to play an important role as well, e.g. Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc (both together with Merlot create popular Bordeaux blends from the state), Syrah, Zinfandel, Barbera. From the whites, Riesling plays the key role, especially after Chateau St Michelle Riesling won an important competition in the 1970s. Other white grapes are: Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Semillon, Pinot Gris. In general Washington state is much more diverse in terms of the grapes grown, with over 50 grapes used. 

Industry Structure:

Oregon: There are about 400 producers in the state. Most of them are small and family owned. Most of the wineries also own vineyards. The success of the wines encouraged outside investments, e.g. Joseph Drouhin and Louis Jadot, both from Burgundy, have recognised the potential of Oregon Pinot Noir and created their wineries in this state. Oregon produces only about 2% of the total USA wine output. 

Washington: this state has about 800 producers, with one producer being significantly bigger than others, i.e. St Michelle. St Michelle owns a lot of vineyards but also buys a lot of fruit.  St Michelle owns many labels. They also collaborated with outside investors, e.g. with Dr Loosen, creating the Eroica Riesling label. Other than that, most producers are rather small and family owned. Interesting fact is that many wineries have their facilities in the western part of the state, near Seattle, which means that often grapes are grown in the AVAs within Columbia Valley but need to be transported to the western part to the actual wineries. Washington produces only about 5% of the total USA wine output. 