

All-Star Team

Long Shadows offers Washington wines made by top international winemakers.

LARRY WALKER



John Duval, Allen Shoup, Gary Figgins (Leonetti), Chris Figgins (Leonetti), Gilles Nicault, Long Shadows resident winemaker

Flying winemakers are a common sighting these days. They appear on everyone's life list, so no extra points for spotting them. They flit from California to Argentina to France to Australia, amassing frequent flyer miles while making, for the most part, unremarkable if inoffensive wines, styled for a one-taste-fits-all international palate.

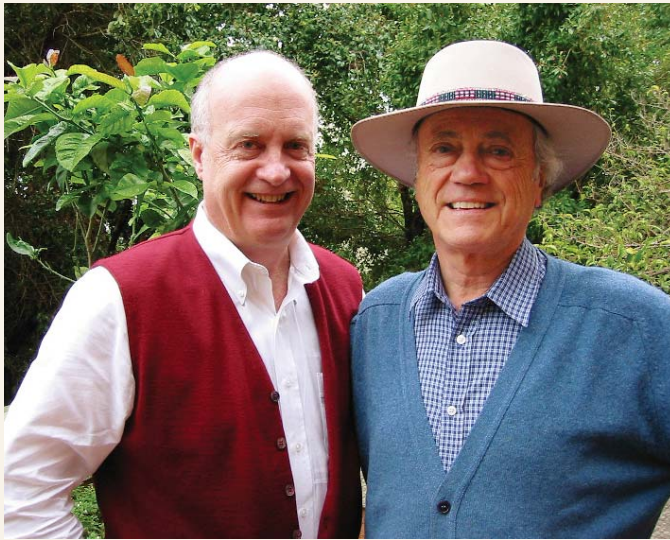
The fairly new Long Shadows wines from Washington state are an exception worth a closer look. When I heard the news a few years ago that Allen Shoup was putting together a group of the world's best-known winemakers to make wine from Washington grapes, I had a hunch the wines would be good, even before I learned who the winemakers were. I was guessing that if Shoup was on the job there would be no worries. All the wines from the Long Shadows project have now been released and I was right.

Shoup is not himself a superstar winemaker, but he has a way of being on the spot when high quality wines are produced. Perhaps more than anyone around, Shoup has been responsible for putting Washington wines on the global wine map. He became head of Chateau Ste. Michelle, then an obscure winery outside of Seattle in 1979, and the rest is corporate history — Shoup developed Ste. Michelle into Stimson

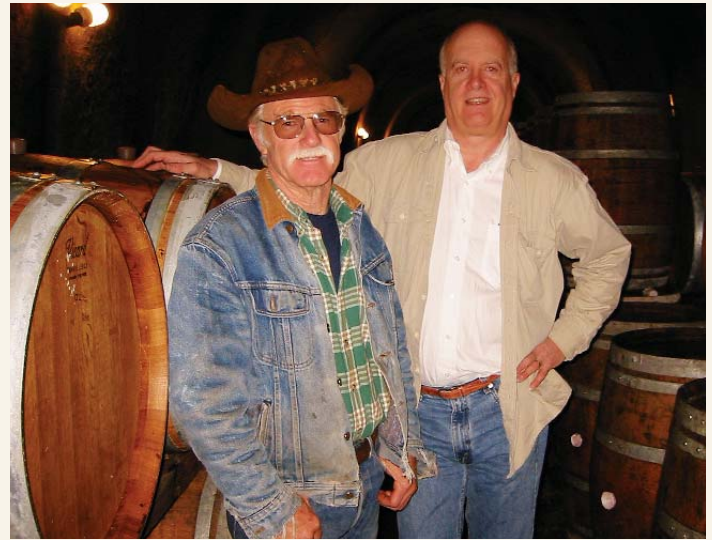
Lane Wineries and Estates, buying and building vineyards and wineries in Washington and in California. And along the way, he made sure that consumers understood that the wines were Washington wines. (Well, there were those California wines. Not sure how that happened, but Shoup is clearly centered on Washington.)

Discussing the Long Shadows project, Shoup said, "I do want to make a statement about Washington wines and I believe that this project will help us reach the next plateau of recognition and acceptance. It may sound naïve, but I never had any doubt about how this project would turn out."

At this point, six wines have been released. They are **Poet's Leap** Riesling, made by Armin Diel from Schlossgut Diel in Germany; **Feather**, a Cabernet Sauvignon, made by Randy Dunn of Dunn Vineyards in California; **Sequel**, a Syrah made by John Duval, formerly of Penfolds Grange of Australia; **Pirouette**, a red wine blend made by Agustin Huneeus of Quintessa of Napa and Philippe Melka of Métisse, Vineyard 29, Hundred Acre and Bryant Family Vineyard, Napa; **Chester-Kidder**, also a red wine blend, made by Gilles Nicault and Allen Shoup from the Columbia Valley; and **Pedestal**, a Merlot made by Michel Rolland, international consultant from Bordeaux.



Allen Shoup and Agustin Huneus



Randy Dunn and Allen Shoup

That all-star cast aside, it is the marvelous wine grapes of the Columbia Valley that steal the show, even if they are shaped to meet an individual winemaking style. I have long been a fan of Washington wines. I was first attracted by the pure, uplifted fruit, but as Washington winemakers began to sort out the best vineyard sites, the wines have become more complex and layered. The mid-1990s were the real coming of age for Washington wines. They moved from being good to very good, to exceptional, sometimes great. By and large, Washington has not followed the California lead of producing overripe, over-concentrated wines.

Before tasting the Long Shadows wines, my only fear was that the assorted winemakers might fly into Washington and try to impose their style on the wine, ignoring what the Washington grapes gave them. Michel Rolland, who has been accused of ‘one size fits all’ (most notably in the film “Mondovino”), said that he isn’t really working any differently. However, he added, “The wine is always the result of the combination of soil, climate, grapes ... we can have a look to find the best viticulture and the best winemaking regarding where we are. Every year is different, and obviously we have to adapt the techniques to the grapes.”

That is exactly the key, it’s why the

Long Shadows wines work. The winemakers involved clearly respect the *terroir* they are working with, which is essential, which is not to say they don’t leave their individual stamp on the wine.

John Duval says he leaves the Barossa Valley of Australia behind when he comes to Washington to make Sequel Syrah. “I saw the potential for Syrah in Washington. I’m not just going in with the idea of making Barossa Valley Syrah in another part of the world. I do have certain techniques but I am respectful of the area.”

Randy Dunn, who was making cult Cabernet from Howell Mountain grapes in Napa before anyone had heard of cult Cabernets, is also determined to make a Washington wine, not a “Randy Dunn” wine.

“In the early 1980s I was a judge at the state fair in Washington. I tasted a lot of red wines and came away thinking “these guys have great fruit but don’t know how to pull it through.” That was more than 20 years ago. It has definitely evolved. There are great wines coming out of Washington now, but they are not getting the publicity they should.”

Like the other winemakers involved, Dunn didn’t change his winemaking technique. “I’m doing everything in Washington pretty much like in Napa, so any differences are due to the fruit. I think the first bottling was pretty nice. I hope we can keep getting the intensity

without getting higher alcohols.”

With due respect, however, there wouldn’t be much point in Randy Dunn flying to Washington three or four times a year if he didn’t make a Cabernet Sauvignon the way Randy Dunn makes Cabernet Sauvignon, or Michel Rolland making a wine that was less than what the world has come to expect from Michel Rolland.

Armin Diel’s Poet’s Leap Riesling is a classic Riesling. Hardly a surprise. Diel is one of Germany’s most acclaimed Riesling producers. His family has owned the estate of Schlossgut Diel in Burg Layen in the Nahe River Valley since 1802. In Germany, the estate has a status comparable to a Grand Cru in Burgundy. The 2004 Poet’s Leap is an elegant wine, with a distinctive balance of ripe peach and floral aromas on the opening, balanced by a bright acidity in the mouth. The finish is long and rich, with ripe pear and just a touch of apricot fruit, as well as harmonious echoes of the opening peach flavor. When people talk about Riesling being the greatest of the white wines, this is the kind of Riesling they have in mind.

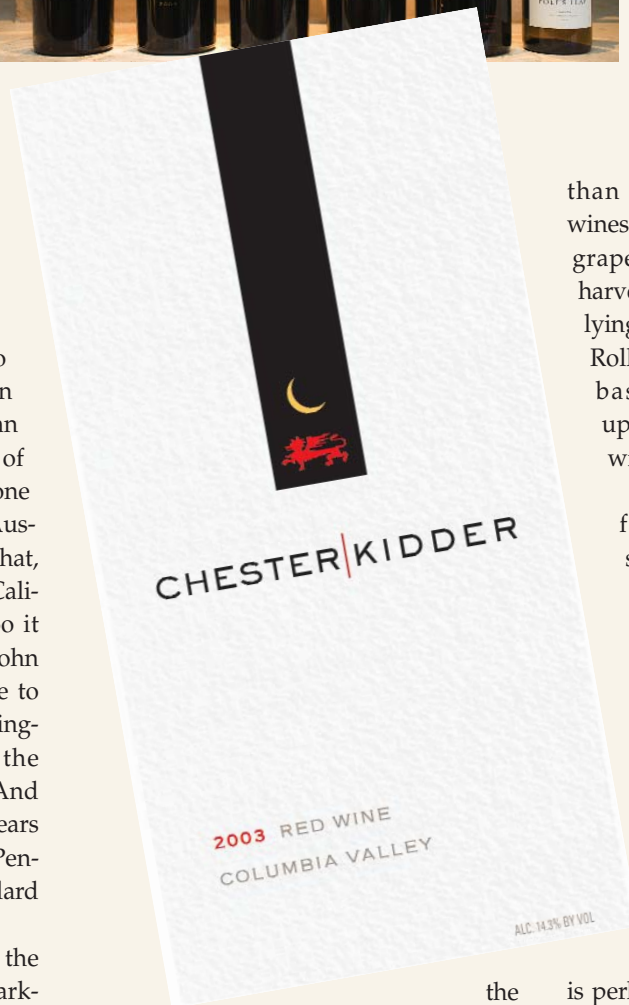
Gilles Nicault is the resident winemaker at Long Shadows. He has a degree in viticulture and oenology from the University of Avignon and worked in the Rhône Valley, Provence and Champagne before coming to Washington in 1994. He knows Columbia Valley grapes well, having spent some time at Woodward

Canyon, among other wineries. I think the 2002 Chester-Kidder red wine blend reflects that knowledge. Perhaps of all the Long Shadows wines, it has more to say about the *terroir* than winemaking technique. The wine has good structure and balance, with marvelous fruit on the opening, followed by complex layers of flavors centered on dark fruit. It is a wine that offers immediate satisfaction but is also capable of extended aging, perhaps in the ten-year range.

I have to admit to mixed feelings about Syrah. Especially as made in California and especially when it is labeled as Shiraz. Not being a trained oenologist, I have never been able to understand how California can — in general — take the worst of Australian Shiraz, tweak it with the downside of California, bottle it and expect anyone to drink it. I am a great fan of good Australian Shiraz, and there is plenty of that, but the blanded-out popsicle fruity California version is not to my taste. So it was with great relief that I tasted John Duval's Sequel Syrah. Sequel is true to the expressive, layered fruit of Washington's Syrah grapes, while giving the wine his own personal signature. And that's a good thing. For almost 30 years Duval was responsible for making Penfolds Grange, which has set the standard for Australian Shiraz.

With his first Washington Syrah, the 2003 Sequel, he has achieved a remarkable synthesis of Australia and Washington. The wine has the concentration and structure we have come to expect from the Grange Shiraz, but with a silky elegant core, wrapped around with dark, supple fruit — blueberries and cherries. The finish is long and layered. A superb wine.

Pirouette is an unusual blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Petite Verdot. It's a joint creation of Philippe Melka and Agustin Huneeus, Sr. from France and Chile by way of the Napa Valley. When I asked Melka what he was looking for in



the Washington wine, he said, "I'm a *terroir* winemaker. I always follow the site."

Pirouette, Melka and Huneeus worked with five different vineyard sites in the Columbia valley, creating a complex layer of flavors, moving out from a solid core of controlled fruit, midway between dark and red flavors, to achieve an overall taste profile that is balanced and supple, with touches of spice and chocolate. This is a remarkable wine. Melka and Huneeus (although Melka is really the winemaker of the pair) took enormous risks working with the vari-

etal blend they selected, working with fruit they didn't know all that well, and pulling it off. Winemaking without a net. Bravo!

The 2003 Pedestal Merlot, made by Michel Rolland, is a big wine, concentrated and rich, as one might expect from Rolland. It is not, however, over the top. There are layers of blueberry and raspberry fruit, laced with chocolate and spice. The finish is long, with intriguing wraparound flavors. More than any of the other Long Shadow wines, it bears the stamp of its maker; the grapes hung on the vine past normal harvest time, giving the wine an underlying jammy quality that seems to be a Rolland trademark. Nevertheless, the basic center of pure, bright and uplifted Washington fruit keeps the wine honest and a pleasure to drink.

Cards on the table, I have been a fan of Randy Dunn's Cabernets since the mid-1970s when he was making the legendary Caymus Special Selection Cabernet from Howell Mountain grapes. His winemaking approach is highly traditional and could be described by what he doesn't do rather than what he does do. Dunn has not followed the latest winemaking trends. He simply makes good wines from good grapes. The 2003 Feather Cabernet Sauvignon

is perhaps a bit more open than Dunn's California Cabernet, but that's the Washington fruit again, not Dunn manipulating the wine. There is ripe and concentrated black cherry fruit at the center, balanced with good acidity and a spicy finish that goes on and on. There is a silky balance to the wine that I found refreshing on the palate — Dunn has managed to create a big, powerful wine with a supple richness that bodes well for long aging.

In sum, Long Shadows is off to a dazzling start. It is a work in progress, for sure, but I would be very surprised if the quality curve doesn't keep rising. ☩