As in the original edition of this book, I have attempted once again to thoroughly cover the history, grapes, AVAs, essential vineyards, and most important wineries in Washington. Reading this book should feel like a tour through the state with an old friend who happens to be a local and who knows it well. I am that friend.

I have lived in Washington since 1972. A Seattleite (“wet-sider” as we’re called) for most of that time, I saw my life change dramatically in 2005 when Mrs. G and I purchased a run-down, all-but-abandoned farmhouse in the city of Waitsburg—population 1,212. Founded in the 1860s by Sylvester Wait, it is located in Washington’s southeast corner, just 18 miles north of Walla Walla. We loved Waitsburg immediately, for the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape, for the easy cordiality of the townspeople, for the peacefulness that we felt whenever we could escape from the big city and come work on our little cottage.

Since then, we’ve spent about half of every month living in eastern Washington. Rather than blasting through for a brief tour and tasting, as most wine writers do, I am now seeing the wine country through the eyes of a resident. This has deeply enriched my appreciation for, and knowledge of, the wines I review.

I remain a critic, not a cheerleader. Any region whose aspirations are to become world-class must have its wines evaluated in the context of the global competition. When I write about a winery making an exciting riesling or merlot or syrah, it goes without saying that I mean the compliment globally. These are not just good wines for the region; they are good wines for the world.
More fervently than ever, I believe that Washington State is well on its way to becoming one of the greatest wine regions in the world. This despite (or perhaps because of) its fringe location, its reliance on irrigation, its desert heat and arctic blasts, its frequent separation of growers and winemakers, its preponderance of tiny, underfunded start-ups, and the persistent myth that it is too cold, too wet, and too far north to make great wine. In other words, despite the fact that Washington is not, and never will be, California. When it comes to exploring unknown viticultural territory and crafting stylistically original, world-class wines, Washington has come as far or further, in less time, than California. Without California’s vast advantages, little Washington has plugged along, driven by dreamers and doers who believed that there was something magical in the land.

People such as John Williams and Jim Holmes, who bought some barren acreage on a desolate hill called Red Mountain back in 1975 and decided to grow cabernet there. People such as Dr. William McAndrew, who planted gewürztraminer and a variety of other grapes in an old apple orchard high above the Columbia Gorge in 1972, dubbed it Celilo, and waited to see what, if anything, would survive. People such as Christophe Baron, a native Champenois who made wine in half a dozen places around the world before circling for a landing in Walla Walla, then doggedly searched for land to plant until he found the rockiest, least likely, most difficult and labor-intensive soil in the region and hand-planted his Cailloux vineyard to syrah.

Newcomers continue to flock to Washington, often abandoning careers in midlife, pulling up stakes and following their winemaking dreams. In these pages you’ll find dozens of new wineries, with names such as Cadaretta, Doubleback, Gramercy Cellars, Hard Row To Hoe, Maison Bleue, Rasa, Tranche, and Trust—all ventures begun by folks who had already built successful lives, but were consumed with a desire to make wine in Washington.

Today Ciel du Cheval and Klipsun cabernet, Champoux merlot and cabernet franc, Celilo gewürztraminer, and Cailloux syrah (to name just a few) can stake a legitimate claim to greatness. They have all passed the test of time, and also the test of timelessness. These vineyards express that elusive, often abused (and misspelled) term _terroir_. Washington’s vigneron’s are beginning to find it, and in the pages of this book you will learn specifically who and what and where.

There is something magical in this land. The pioneers were right about that, as are those who continue to explore and expand viticulture in Washington today. It’s true that the eleven AVAs now officially recognized include millions of acres of land that is not, and will never be, dedicated to wine grape growing. But tucked away here and there are the sites that work, that have the potential, if properly managed, to create exceptional wines. Finding those places is what has obsessed those who have pioneered winemaking during the first few decades of Washington’s modern wine era.

The exploration continues, in previously untapped regions such as Lake Chelan, a new AVA that may hold the key to great Washington pinot noir, if such is ever to exist;
in potential future AVAs such as the Ancient Lakes, where vineyards barely a decade old are producing grapes with astonishing complexity, minerality, and verve; and in the outer reaches of well-established AVAs such as Walla Walla, where the newest vineyards are reaching higher into the mountains and pushing deeper into wheat country than ever before.

For a wine lover, Washington is experiencing a delicious moment in time. How many people in the history of the world have witnessed the flowering of a brand-new, world-class wine region? Who among us has tasted, in each new vintage, wines that push the envelope a bit further than it has previously been pushed, that reveal unknown or unsuspected layers of flavor and bouquet, nuances previously locked away in a piece of scrub desert, or a rocky riverbed, or a mountainside blanketed in volcanic dust?

The dust of exploration has not entirely settled, to be sure, but it continues to be mapped, studied, ripped, planted, trellised, irrigated, fertilized, chronicled, and delineated into more and more meaningful subregions. The wineries and vineyards that survived the mistakes and trials of Washington’s early years have learned some hard-won lessons, making it easier for those who follow in their footsteps to craft excellent wines (though competing for customers in such a crowded marketplace has never been more difficult).

Honest feedback from a well-informed, widely traveled wine journalist can be quite valuable to any winery willing to listen to what is being said. In an effort to ensure that my words of praise ring true to readers, I must be carefully selective. The first edition of this book included only about one quarter of the state’s wineries. This edition expands that to a third—roughly double the previous number of winery entries. That is both to acknowledge the industry’s rampant growth and to recognize that improvement in quality is ongoing and pervasive.

Nonetheless, I’m still leaving out two-thirds of those who make wine for a living in Washington, and believe me, they are not likely to be selling my book in their tasting rooms or singing its praises to their customers. But I am writing this for you consumers, who don’t need another guidebook that simply lists every winery and salutes its wines as if all were created equal. You know, and I know, they are not.

My methodology and palate preferences, as I explain on my website (www.paulgregutt.com), are as follows. I prefer to taste wines for review when they are finished and bottled rather than in barrel, and just ahead of their official release dates. I taste in controlled settings, using proper stemware, and I give the wines as much time and attention as they deserve, often returning to them over a period of days. Several times each month I sit down at one-on-one tastings with winemakers, distributors, or importers. I also attend trade events and participate in two long-established tasting groups whose members include winemakers, wine distributors, wine retailers, and knowledgeable consumers.

I seek out those wines that best demonstrate typicity, specificity, clarity, elegance, polish, depth, and balance. If the wine is varietal, I want it to taste like the varietal. If it is from a specific place, I want to taste something unique that is derived from that
place. If a wine is designated by vineyard, clone, or block; if it is labeled “old vine” or “winemaker’s select” or “reserve,” I think it should justify that verbiage by showing me something specific and special. It’s OK by me if a wine is light, as long as it is not thin; elegant, but not wimpy; powerful, but not brutal; dense, but not monolithic. Obviously the qualities I seek are more easily found at higher price points, but when I recommend an inexpensive wine, you may be certain it stands out well above its peers.

In the first edition of this book, I embarked upon a rather quixotic quest to recalibrate the nearly ubiquitous 100-point scoring system. I decided to do this because, as I explained, the purported 100-point scale, in actual practice, is not a 100-point scale at all, nor even close. For all practical purposes, it has become a 10-point scale. Wines rated under 85 are ignored completely. Wines rated 85 to 89 must be marketed as value wines—those numbers work only for wines priced at the low end of the scale. If your wine is going to sell for $15 or more, it must hit 90 points at least. Once a wine moves up the ladder from there, it becomes increasingly rare and expensive. As a result, wines scoring 95 or above are virtually unobtainable.

I felt it made more sense to use at least half of the 100-point scale—alloting scores between 50 and 100—and to score wineries rather than individual wines. With that in mind, I awarded up to 30 points each for style, consistency, and value, and up to 10 points for the winery’s contribution to the development and improvement of the Washington wine industry. And just to be very clear, I emphasized that every winery included in the book was, in my view, well above average. Every score, even one in the 50s or 60s, was a good score in this radically revised 100-point system.

This new edition does not use numerical ratings. I made my point, and most readers and reviewers appreciate what I was trying to do. This time, I’ve adopted a much simpler star rating. The exact same standards are being applied; it’s just the scoring system that is simplified. As before, wineries are being evaluated for a combination of strengths, particularly style, consistency, and value, displayed over a period of time.

In terms of style, I am looking for wineries with a unique, clearly defined, technically flawless style. When I taste a Leonetti Cellar wine, for example, I recognize a particular combination of superb fruit, layering of barrel flavors, and satiny, impactful, seductive mouthfeel that is unique and that has been a hallmark of the winery for three decades. That’s what a five-star winery does in terms of style. Every winery in this book is making strides toward establishing its own style. It’s not easy to do. There are thousands upon thousands of great guitar players, but how many can you identify on the basis of, say, two or three well-struck notes? It’s not easy to be really good, but it’s much harder to be unique.

Consistency is simply a measure of experience. Young wineries are experimenting, changing blends, changing vineyard sources, working hard to define themselves. The best will eventually settle into a style and stay there consistently, but that takes time. Wineries that have succeeded in making excellent wines over many vintages naturally deserve a higher rating than those just getting started.
Value is not the same as cheap. There are plenty of $6 and $8 wines in the world that are not good values. And there are a few $50 or even $100 wines that are exceptional values, given the quality. My Top 100 lists, published on pages 303–313, are a good indication of which wines offer both exceptional quality and outstanding value. You will find twenty wineries singled out as five-star wineries, forty-five four-star wineries, sixty three-star wineries, and in the “Rising Stars” chapter, dozens of Washington’s newest wineries, their careers just taking off, that have already caught my attention with outstanding wines.

If you already have your own list of favorite Washington wineries, you may find one or two missing from my own selections. Please do not take offense. Some are simply too new to evaluate. Some do not choose to take advantage of the many opportunities to submit their wines for review. Some simply do not suit my personal tastes.

There are many sources, both in print and online, that offer opinions and ratings about wines. Even the most educated palates frequently disagree. I belong to two long-established tasting groups that count among their members winemakers, distributors, retailers, and salespeople, many of them with impressive credentials and decades of experience. The roundtable discussions that our blind tastings ignite are never dull, usually hilarious, and frequently combative. They certainly sharpen my thinking and my palate, and I thank my fellow tasters (you know who you are) for sharing your time and talents so generously.

I think there is value in such group discussions, but when you read of medals awarded or points given to individual wines by tasting/judging panels, no matter how well credentialed, you may be certain that compromise was involved. When wines are reviewed and scored by a single individual, one person’s palate is involved, not the decision of a committee. You can agree or disagree, but at least you have a compass and an orientation.

I taste roughly six thousand to eight thousand wines annually, mostly at home, in peer group flights. I supplement these tastings with numerous trips to wineries throughout Washington, along the West Coast, and overseas. As I live half of the time in Seattle and the other half in Walla Walla County, I travel regularly throughout the length and breadth of Washington wine country. As often as time permits, I taste new releases with winemakers, believing that the information gleaned from our conversations outweighs any chance that my impressions will be overly influenced by their presence.

I do not like hit-and-run wine judging. There are snapshots and there are movies; I think wines are movies that should be observed in motion. With that in mind, I taste wines slowly, over many hours, with and without food, and sometimes over several days. I believe that there are times when we must extend ourselves to a wine and give it a decent chance to show its stuff.

One reason that massive, jammy, oaky, fruit-bomb wines tend to win high scores and gold medals is that they stand out quickly during rapid-fire wine tastings. If a wine is one of 150 or 200 bottles being sampled in a single day (this is standard practice at wine judgments!), is it any wonder that only the biggest, brawniest, most forward and ripe
will be noticed? I have lost count of the times that a young wine, just opened, failed to
perform. Wines submitted for review are new releases; many have just recently been
blended and bottled. They have had little time to settle down and may be a bit “shocked.”
But give these wines a few hours or even days, and they may open up beautifully. Which
is the more accurate impression—the instant snapshot or the film clip?

Of course, there are many wines whose simplistic structure or generic character are
instantly apparent. Retasting after some hours have passed merely serves to confirm the
original opinion. Flawed wines with TCA, microbial taint, oxidation, volatile acidity, and
so forth are also easily and quickly chronicled. But often it is the very wines that best
demonstrate terroir—whose innate structure, balance, clarity, precision, and depth port-
tend ageworthiness—that are wrapped up tight as mummies when first opened. These
are the gems that will benefit from extra hours of breathing and decanting. These are the
wines that are easiest to miss in a hit-and-run evaluation.

I especially value wines that do not obliterate nuance in favor of the crowd-pleasing
flavors of new oak. Wines built upon grapes ripened to appropriate levels for their par-
ticular vineyard site. Wines with complex and detailed aromas, with well-defined fruit,
and with balancing acids and tannins that are harmoniously integrated into the whole.
The wines that I most enjoy and constantly search for are those that have a focus. They
taste like something specific—a particular grape variety or well-defined varietal blend,
grown and made into wine in a special place.

The best wines reflect the soil, climate, and vintage conditions of the vineyard. The
French word terroir, which has no English equivalent, describes a wine that expresses
the grape, the soil, the site, and the climate through its complex scents and flavors.
Excessive ripeness, super-extraction, alcohol topping 15, 16, or even 17 percent (in unfor-
tified dry wines!), and the ham-handed application of expensive new oak—the formula
for many so-called cult wines—will obliterate terroir (if it is there to begin with).

Such jammy, flashy, high-octane, hedonistic wines are rarely fit companions at meal-
time. Their very bigness—Port-like levels of fruit and alcohol, smelling like a lumber
yard—makes it difficult to down a second glass. Many vintners in this state recognize
that bigger is not necessarily better. Washington’s unique geography gives them the
opportunity, the potential, to ripen grapes to physiological maturity while retaining high
natural acid levels and keeping sugars and pH in balance. If the vineyard is sited well,
the vines are managed well, the picking is done at the right time, and the winemaking is
noninterventionist, there is a real chance to find that elusive terroir.

Terroir-driven wines have the best chance of aging over the long term. Throughout
both editions of this book, I have noted vertical tastings of Washington wines, from
vintages going back as many as 30 years. They prove that this state has the ability to pro-
duce wines with the structure and character not only to last but to improve. Among the
white wines, it is riesling that will last the longest, as a ten-year retrospective of Eroica
recently demonstrated (they all had many years of life still ahead). Washington merlots
can improve for at least a decade and continue to provide drinking pleasure for another decade. Some cabernets and Bordeaux blends may last even longer.

On average, I would recommend drinking most white wines within three years of their release, though rieslings (and perhaps other aromatic whites, such as gewürztraminer) can be held far longer. Washington syrahs are a bit of a mystery; they are almost always peak performers when very young, and I have had little opportunity to taste extensively of well-aged versions.

Merlots should generally be consumed within six to eight years; cabernets within ten to twelve. Wines that are especially high in alcohol (more than 15 percent) and unusually low in acid (or high in pH), that display powerful barrel aromas and flavors, along with raisin or prune, or that show early hints of oxidation or browning are not likely to cellar well.

Back in the 1970s a typical bottle of Washington cabernet would have between 12 and 12.5 percent alcohol. Today the average is at least two percentage points higher. The interesting thing is that some of those older wines have aged beautifully. They may have been underripe by today’s standards, but with the passing of time they have evolved flavors that are closer to European wines than most others made in America. These occasional early successes clearly point the way to a Washington winemaking style that straddles the border between the massive, fruit-powered wines of California and the more acidic, austere, herbal, mineral-laced, terroir-driven wines of Europe.

A number of wineries in Washington are actively exploring this borderline, crafting superb wines that suit the twenty-first-century palate, that beautifully accompany the foods we most enjoy—wines that will not only persist but evolve over time. These wines are the beacons that show us where to find true terroir in these brand-new New World vineyards. They are the wineries that often draw my highest praise in these pages.

Author’s note: For ongoing, up-to-the-minute information on Washington wines, wineries, vineyards, events, and tourism, as well as lively discussions of wine industry topics, please visit www.paulgregutt.com.