

{ travelogue }

THE SOMMS

Made Him Do It



BEHIND THE SCENES OF **SUBSTANCE'S** NEWEST SMALL- PRODUCTION LABEL



SOMM Journal managing editor Ruth Tobias; O'Neill Vintners & Distillers senior national account manager of on-premise Denise Van Herpen; Travis Hinkle, corporate beverage manager for Landry's properties Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse, Del Frisco's Grille, Strip House, and Strip House The Speakeasy; O'Neill Vintners & Distillers manager of brand activation and communication Helina Tucker; DineAmic Hospitality wine director Marsha Wright; Substance winemaker Brennon Leighton; and Mike Clark, buyer at MB Spirits, in the Golden West Vineyard in Washington's Royal Slope AVA.



The Substance booth at Taste Washington's Grand Tasting in Seattle, where Clark pronounced its Bx Bordeaux-style blend "killer. At \$50, it's worth every penny."

story by **RUTH TOBIAS** photos by **RAFAEL PETERSON**

Tattooed and goateed in keeping with his background in Seattle's 1990s-era punk rock scene, Brennon Leighton doesn't look like your average winemaker. Nor does he sound like one, citing Black Flag and Fugazi as his influences as much as, say, legendary Loire Valley producer Didier Dagueneau. And he certainly doesn't serve as your run-of-the-mill guide to Washington wine. In March, I joined him and three visiting sommeliers—Travis Hinkle, a Philadelphia-based corporate beverage manager for Landry's; Mike Clark, buyer at MB Spirits, the liquor retailer attached to New England grocery chain Market Basket; and Marsha Wright, wine director of Chicago's DineAmic Hospitality group—on a whirlwind two-day tour of the state sponsored by *The SOMM Journal*. To call it an eye-opening experience is an understatement: It was at once an immersion into the local terroir; a crash course in winemaking; and a deeply personal encounter with the self-described "irreverent and mavericky" mastermind behind the Substance brand.



Substance sources several varieties from Golden West Vineyard, including Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, and Chardonnay.

The seeds of inspiration for the trip had been planted a year prior, when Wright visited Leighton for the first time. Having bonded during a harrowing drive through a snowstorm from wine country to Seattle, the two unwound over cocktails at one of Leighton's favorite watering holes, where she asked him, "Why don't you make a Merlot?" As he recalled, "I go, 'Well, I just don't make Merlot.' She's like, 'Would

you make a Merlot for me?' And I said, 'Absolutely, and we'll name it Marsha Made Me Do It.' And then we thought, 'Why don't we do this with other people as well, and we'll call the wine Somms Made Me Do It.'" That vision would be realized via an intense and fascinating blending session—but not until we got a thorough grounding in some of the vineyards from which the bottling would come.

The Lay of the Land

En route to three select sites, Leighton provided an overview of Substance, a brand "originally created by another wine-maker," he explained. "Around 2012, [a former partner] and I realized that it was up for sale, and we really liked the label!" But they felt they could improve upon the juice behind it, producing "wines of substance, of purity, of integrity. We would source them from sustainable vineyards and make them the right way, doing native fermentation and extended maceration." The trick was to work with growers capable of higher-density plantings "so we'd get more intense, concentrated wines without spending so much money on the fruit, because that's typically the biggest cost prohibitor," he continued. "If I could keep those prices down, then I could make these wines for \$20 instead of \$60 or \$80. I can make \$150 bottles all day; what excites me is making wine that people can afford and enjoy."

Meanwhile, Leighton also gave us the lay of the land. As we drove north from the town of Prosser through the scenic Yakima Valley, he told us about the Missoula floods that inundated Eastern Washington thousands of years ago, forming its numerous hills, dales, and diverse soil profiles suitable for all



A lively welcome dinner at The Prosser House in Prosser, WA, was paired with a wide range of Substance wines.

sorts of agriculture—including the apple and cherry orchards as well as the mint and hops fields he pointed out, noting that “most winegrowers here also grow other perennial crops. I know about all of them because I’m competing with them for growing space: [For instance,] when I smell the hops, I know I need to start picking Syrah soon.” He described the region’s high-desert climate, marked by just 6–8 inches of annual rainfall in contrast to the considerably wetter conditions further west, and the “short, intense harvests” that typically begin in mid-September, sparking “a race to get things done before the first frost” in late October. He kept us apprised of our changes in elevation while observing that “the easy thing to understand about Washington is all the mountain ranges go east to west—Horse Heaven Hills, Rattlesnake Hills, Saddle Mountain, Frenchman Hills, Breezy Mountain—and all the slopes come off of them north to south.” It was an overview all the more masterful for being off the cuff.

We eventually arrived at Sportfisher Vineyard in the Columbia Valley AVA, a key source of Cabernet Sauvignon for Leighton, who remarked on the “talcum-y” quality of the soil—“it’s almost like this really fine loess” above hard basalt—and the two-vine trellising system that’s a hedge against the aforementioned freezes. We then had lunch atop a picturesque incline in the Golden West Vineyard in the Royal Slope AVA, from whose limestone and volcanic soils he gets Pinot Noir as well as some Cabernet, Merlot, and Chardonnay. Thanks to the moderating effect of the Columbia River on the site, “it doesn’t get too hot; it doesn’t get too cold—it’s kind of the perfect place,” he said, adding that he refuses to use copper as a fungicide there (or anywhere) because “it’s not salmon-safe. It destroys fish habitat. I use sulfur, so I can’t be certified organic, but everything else I do is organic.” He’s also particular about orientation: “Everything that I plant is at 22 degrees southwest. In late July, early August, 4 o’clock is usually the hottest part of the day, and I’m getting sun coming straight down the middle of my row, so I’m not cooking one side or the other; I’m getting very uniform ripening.”

Finally, we visited Evergreen Vineyard in the Ancient Lakes AVA, which, “to me, is a world-class vineyard,” he asserted. Yielding his Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, and



Leighton preparing a Somms Made Me Do It blend for discussion.

Riesling, “it literally makes some of the best white wines in the world: mineral, earthy, high acidity, great focus.” Along the way, we of course tasted several Substance bottlings, including a 2021 Chardonnay, itself minerally and bready yet richly fruited, and the 2023 version, round and sunny yet fresh with cantaloupe; the newly launched 2025 Riesling, redolent of apricot, lemon, and baby’s breath; and a peppery, intriguingly savory

2021 Pinot Noir. With that, some people might have called it a day—but again, Leighton is not most people, and ours was far from over.

“Good Is Good”

Our two-hour midafternoon trip to Seattle provided a dramatic demonstration of Washington’s contrasting terroirs as high desert gave way to the Cascade Mountains—heavily forested and



“Wine is so weird,” Hinkle mused as he and Clark assessed a sample. “It’s just amazing how a tiny bit of tweaking totally changes it.” Agreed Clark, referring to a component blend of 60% Cabernet and 40% Malbec, “This is like the biggest fish in an aquarium tank. It’s going to make its mark on anything you put it in.”

snow-dusted under sometimes stormy skies—and then to the big city, where we repaired to a brewery to discuss the aforementioned blending trial, for which Leighton had chosen six top barrel lots from the 2023 vintage.

“You need to think more than you sip, because [otherwise] you’re going to wear your palate out before you figure out what you want to do,” he coached the somms. “What you smell and [taste], those things are going to change constantly—they will not be the same from when you decide now to when the wine’s in the bottle. But the one thing that doesn’t change is the mouthfeel. So focus on trying to get a mouthfeel that has continuity to it—whether it’s elegant and refined or big and bold, you’re putting together a narrative about the wine through the mouthfeel.”

While encouraging them to offer their opinions freely “because you can gain a lot by talking about it with somebody else—I don’t like to blend alone, I like to blend with people”—he had a couple of caveats. One, “I want to warn you that I don’t fuck with [percentages] under 5,” he said. “Nothing under 5% makes any difference. If you want to add 5% or 8% or 10% of something that’s cool and interesting, do that. But don’t exhaust

yourself trying to figure out something that’s not there.” And two, “when you put together the right blend, it’s so fucking obvious. If it’s not making sense, abandon ship and start over—you are forcing the idea. Wines have their own thoughts and are really good at telling you.”

We soon found ourselves in a charming nearby Airbnb, where catering chef Jack Rogers was preparing our dinner and the table was set for the trial, laden with bottles, glasses, beakers, and graduated cylinders galore. With a 100% Syrah from Boushey Vineyard; a 100% Merlot from Golden West; a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Sportfisher and Painted Hills; a blend of 70% Cabernet and 30% Malbec from three sites, Gearhart, Rosebud, and Stoneridge; a 100% Cabernet from Golden West and Northridge; and a blend of 60% Cabernet and 40% Malbec from Mrachek, Frenchman, and Golden West to consider—all of which had spent a year and a half in used French oak—the group got straight to work.

“The Merlot stands out to me,” said Wright. “It’s silky, it’s elegant, the mid-palate is very refined, and the finish is lingering yet friendly.” Hinkle singled out the Cabernet from Golden West and Northridge: “There’s a little more tannin here, but there’s also acid, and it just feels



balanced.” And Clark, for his part, called the 60/40 Cabernet-Malbec blend “a little bit more Old World, which I like.” From there, ideas began to fly: Hinkle proposed a 60/40 blend of wines two and five, Wright a 70/30 blend of wines two and six, and Clark a 70/30 blend of five and two, while Leighton himself played with a more Cab-dominated blend. Along the way, he offered insights into his approach, for instance noting that “if tannin is awkward when you’re blending, it will be awkward for the rest of its life. We all think that tannin softens over time, and it does, but the rest of the wine softens as well—it falls apart. So it’s very important to me that the tannins fall into place.”

The somms tinkered, tasted, talked, and tinkered some more; gradually, a plan for the Somms Made Me Do It wine began to take shape, and two strong contenders emerged. One contained 60% of the Cab-Malbec blend from Mrachek,



While working on her blend, Wright noted, "I'm thinking about my guests in our restaurants, so I want something that's very friendly with food."

Frenchman, and Golden West; 25% of the Merlot from Golden West; and 15% of the Cab from Golden West and Northridge. The other contained those same wines in different amounts: 60% of the Merlot and 20% each of the Cab and the Cab-Malbec blend. As we sat down to try them with our meal, Hinkle pronounced them "delicious. Here's what I think we just did: We reinvented Left Bank and Right Bank Bordeaux." That was perfectly fine by Clark, who repeated what had become our rallying cry over the course of the day: "Good is good."

Ultimately, they chose the former blend, of which Leighton is making 900 cases. Hinkle, Wright, and Clark have each committed to purchasing some for exclusive sale in their establishments, where they can proudly tell the tale of how the wine

came to be, right down to its custom label with a name of their choosing.

Tracing the Throughline

"Washington is a place that's hard to get to know," Leighton acknowledged by way of preparing us for a second full day of vinous adventure. Especially given that "we're not ones to toot our own horns," in his words, finding a clear throughline between "a lot of interesting wines with different perspectives from different personalities" can be tricky. But ultimately, he added, "They're all coming from the same DNA. I think Washington has something to say—a very beautiful thing to say. And quality wins out over time" when it comes to marketplace success.

Following a leisurely walk through Seattle's historic Pike Place Market and

brunch at the nearby Café Campagne (the first of five restaurants and bars to which Leighton, ever the bon vivant, would lead his merry cohort over the next 12 hours), we made our way to Taste Washington's annual Grand Tasting at the Lumen Field Event Center. There, to pair with bites from 75 chefs, some 200 local producers poured a dazzling array of expressions—and Leighton seemed to know just about all of them. We chatted with his friend Matías Kúsuplas, the winemaker for Massalto, Valo, and Gård, as well as Michael Savage of Savage Grace and Upwind's Hannah Coulson, among others; we sampled Gamays and Gewürztraminers, Grüner Veltliners and Vermentinos, Syrahs and Sangioveses. And we of course lingered at the Substance table, where a few bottlings we hadn't previously encountered stood out to the somms.

"I carry Substance Cabernet; it has always been my favorite. However, this single-vineyard Sauv Blanc? Beautiful," mused Wright, referring to a 2021 example hailing from the limestone soils of Sunset Vineyard, which according to Leighton saw no malolactic conversion in homage to Dagueneau. "The Rosé is awesome too; I think it's underrated," she commented after tasting the zesty yet floral 2022 vintage, which came from a block of Pinot Noir in the Evergreen Vineyard specifically grown for rosé. Another big hit was the 2019 Bx, a simultaneously vivid and earthy blend of 40% Merlot, 31% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 29% Cabernet Franc from the Klein Vineyard in Walla Walla Valley. "It has some good New World fruit but also hearkens back to its roots in the Old World," observed Hinkle, adding, "I love seeing the range and variety of Substance, and I think it's doing a great job representing Washington, [where] it's been really exciting to discover things that may not make it outside of the state that I don't always get to see."

As we decompressed afterward over more Substance Sauvignon Blanc and geoduck crudo at Taylor Shellfish Farms Oyster Bar, Clark echoed that sentiment. "On the East Coast, I see Cab, Pinot, Chard, Sauv Blanc. [So] I was very surprised at all the different varieties that I had no idea could be made here," he said—just as our travels the day before

The gang gathers at Taste Washington's Grand Tasting.



had opened his eyes: "We went from desert with hills to vineyards to what almost appeared to be a rainforest when we were driving up with all that fog, and now we're in the city. My perception of Washington before coming here was a lot different." Agreed Hinkle, "It gives you a better appreciation for how important terroir is and how it can change so quickly from place to place."

It was nearing 5 p.m., but the day was still young, at least by Leighton's estimation: Happy hour at beloved Chinese dive bar Gan Bei was in the cards, followed by a multicourse feast at hip Italian restaurant Mezzanotte and a nightcap at yet another cocktail lounge. In short, the passionate producer would leave no stone unturned—or bottle unopened—to prove to us that "there are so many great things that are happening in Washington outside of myself that I'm totally overwhelmed and amazed by on a daily basis," as he put it. But as for himself, he added, Substance allows him to give wine drinkers across the country the same opportunity he had given us: the chance to experience his home state in all its wildly diverse glory. "I'm that bridge between nerd and commercial," he said. "I'm trying to make punk rock into pop." As Hinkle responded, "That's the best place to be." SJ



Dinner at Mezzanotte in Seattle.