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Wine is a Food Group: A look at Washington state's first \$800 bottle of wine

Gwendolyn Elliott Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
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Billo, left, and Pinto Naravane during blending trials for the 2021 Naravane cab. The wine is designated Columbia Valley AVA, with fruit sourced from Ciel du Cheval (Red Mountain AVA), Southwind (Walla Walla AVA), Summit View (Walla Walla AVA), and Goose Ridge (Goose Gap AVA) Vineyards.

Courtesy

Wines approaching \$1,000 a bottle or more are not uncommon in the ultra-premium, cult wine market.

Prized by collectors, the recent 2021 vintage is a good example: Highly sought-after bottles such as Screaming Eagle, a Napa cabernet; Pingus, a tempranillo from Spain; and Australia's Hill of Grace syrah will easily set you back four figures (\$1,350, \$1,000 and \$1,050, respectively), according to wine website Vinous.com.

In recent years, the release price of the most expensive bottles of Washington state wine — from producers such as Leonetti, Cayuse, Doubleback and Quilceda Creek — have generally ranged between \$150 and \$250 a bottle (on the secondary market, prices soar higher). All things considered, if you're a collector and desire what many consider to be the best of Washington state wine, there are few better deals in the

global market.

This paradigm was upended in May, when Walla Walla-based Rasa Vineyards released its 2021 cabernet sauvignon, called Naravane, for an eye-popping \$800 per standard 750 ml bottle, out-pricing the state's top reigning brands — and all of the wines in its own portfolio — by hundreds upon hundreds of dollars, and instantly becoming the most expensive bottle of wine ever to be released in the state.

The news generated robust local conversation and stirred up opinions. Individuals from the wine community I spoke with expressed incredulity, awe, curiosity, skepticism and surprise. Social media threads lit up with theories, assessments, spirited defenses and crushing judgments.

A wine lover on a writer's salary, I am not immune to sticker shock. With an eyebrow raised myself, I went to interview Rasa winemakers, brothers Billo and Pinto Naravane, and taste the wine at the downtown tasting room.

“Washington can, and should, sustain these higher price points,” said older brother Pinto, who is co-winemaker and lives in New Jersey. “We're making a statement. We're not pricing wines at a higher price just to price wine at a high price, it is ultimately about respect to make world-class quality wine that deserves that kind of respect around the world.”

As a self-proclaimed Washington wine dork, on an instinctual level, certainly on a biased one, I felt that Pinto was right. In an industry obsessed with scores (whether or not this is objectively good is another story), Washington gets quite respectable ones — we compete, we're reviewed and we're written about in all the same publications as every other major wine-producing region.

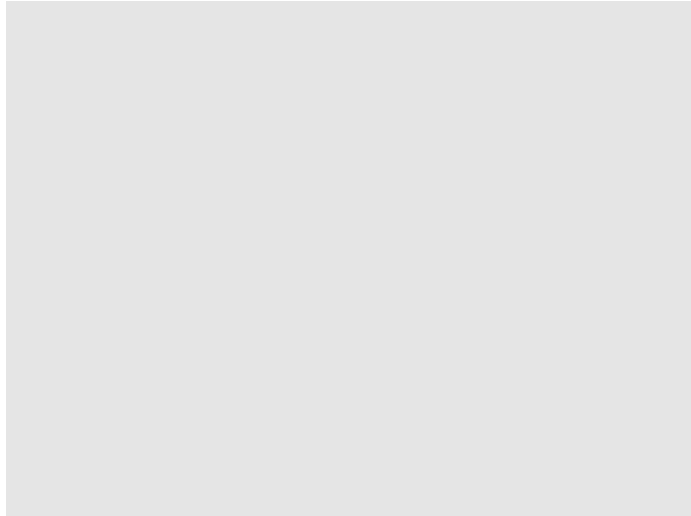
Another feather in our cap is the state's exceptional quality-to-price ratio — a talking point often repeated by industry proponents.

One interesting anecdotal nugget I unearthed in my casual conversations about Rasa's splashy new wine is that some wineries in the state, with its famously stable prices and a “highest-priced wine ... one-twentieth the average price of Napa's most expensive,” (wine-searcher.com), haven't marked up successive vintages of their wines in any considerable way for years.

Pinto recalled a heated conversation he had with a sommelier when he and Billo released their first reserve wine, the 2007 Principia syrah, in 2009. Even then, he says, it was the most expensive syrah in Washington state upon release. At the time, the wine was \$85.

Pinto says the sommelier argued the wine was “‘too expensive for Washington.’ I said, ‘You're looking at this the wrong way, you have to look at the world's perspective ... Sometimes, you need an outsider to tell you that you have gold here. You argue as if [Washington state wine is] the bastard cousin to Napa and Sonoma. You're not. You deserve equal footing.’”

There is no question Billo and Pinto have a passion for wine and the distinctive viticultural areas across Washington's Columbia Valley that produce such excellent fruit. With a combined background comprising advanced degrees and years of experience in tech, mathematics, engineering and computer science, the brothers crunched the numbers and determined Walla Walla was the place to launch their winery in 2007.



The 2021 Naravane cabernet sauvignon
Courtesy

Around that time, Billo earned an MS in viticulture and enology at UC Davis, and later, the title of Master of Wine (MW) — “the highest certification that you can receive in the world of wine,” says Pinto, who is currently studying to become one, too.

Rasa’s own reviews and scores support their academic approach to winemaking (the Naravane has been scored 100 points by two wine writers, and more reviews are expected, the winemakers say). Billo, who provides consulting winemaking services to a number of clients, told me he believes he is “the winemaker with the most 95 plus points in Washington's history.” (I reached out to the Washington State Commission, which couldn’t verify this but said, “at least he’d be in the top!”)

Additionally, Pinto believes Rasa’s pricing structure for its top-tier wines (determined through a comparative blind tasting with industry experts) has, since the 2007 Principia, helped elevate the profile of Washington wine to a level now where some are capable of achieving a “place among the best of the world.” The Naravanes call this their effort to “lift all boats.”

“The interesting thing that happened [with the release of the 2007 Principia] was at first we got blowback,” Pinto says. “[Then] all of a sudden, there’s a whole bunch of wineries pricing their wines at \$95. Gramercy, they started their winery a year before us, but their price points kind of crept up right after us. And a few others. I’m not saying we were responsible for it, but I think we were certainly at the starting of that curve.”

Whether or not the steep price of Rasa’s 2021 cab can inspire more aspirational regional pricing remains to be seen. Certainly there’s the chance lesser quality wines can try to ride the wave and have the opposite effect the brothers intend: that the quality-to-price ratio starts to slip and ends up tarnishing the state’s reputation and ongoing struggle to achieve a greater, more renowned global identity.

There’s also the issue of optics — up and down Main Street, where the Rasa tasting room is located, some tasting rooms have recently closed or are preparing to close, while other recently shuttered businesses from clothing retailers to bike shops to restaurants to taphouses sit empty with “For Rent” signs in their windows — a lot of sinking ships for local business leaders who wish to ‘lift all boats.’

Finally, there has long been an understanding that Washington “doesn’t price itself beyond the reach of the average wine drinker” (wine-searcher.com); how or if such a sky-high price might affect consumer behavior or tourism is another unknown.

If we’re deemed too expensive, will casual wine drinkers take their vacations elsewhere? Will we start seeing more high-rolling wine buyers, and the impossibly high standards for service and hospitality they’re known for (which Walla Walla, lacking in Michelin stars and 5-star hotels, is currently unable to sustain)? Do we want to become a wine community that courts those types of buyers anyway?

If any publicity is good publicity, my simple hope is that Rasa’s splashy announcement has an invigorating effect throughout the world of Washington wine.

As for the wine itself, many descriptions came to mind. My lasting impression is that it is excellent, and far out of my league.



Gwendolyn Elliott is a writer and editor in Walla Walla and was the first recipient of the Allen Shoup Memorial Fellowship for wine writers. Her website is gwendolynelliott.com.