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Brian Carter blends like nobody's business

WineAdviser

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We have reached a moment in the modern history of the Washington wine industry where some of the veteran winemakers — grizzled though they may be — are at the height of their long careers. They are making wines with confidence and style. Their decades of work have taught them a great deal about extracting greatness from the unique variations in weather and terrain that define Eastern Washington viticulture.

I met Brian Carter some 25 years ago, when he was making a lively range of wines at the original Paul Thomas winery in Bellevue. Along with the excellent rieslings, chardonnays and cabernets were a most unusual pair of dry wines, made from Bartlett pear and rhubarb respectively. When Brian Carter left the winery in 1988, its glory days quickly drew to a close.

Fast forward to a lovely late winter afternoon in 2008. The tasting room at Brian Carter Cellars (14419 Woodinville Redmond Road; 425-806-9463) is packed with customers happily sampling new releases and chatting with the winemaker. Carter, entering his 29th vintage in Washington, has never looked more at home. After many years of winemaking and consulting for Paul Thomas, Washington Hills, Apex, Hedges, McCrea and Kestrel, among others, he is now pouring a delicious mix of blended wines for his own winery.

It is no exaggeration to say they are the best wines he has ever made.

I am not the first to take notice. The Auction for Washington Wines named Carter its Vintner of the Year in 2007. He is the only three-time winner of the Enological Society's Grand Prize. His Apex Cellars 2000 Syrah was named the best wine (out of 350) at the Thomas Jefferson Wine and Food Classic, and brought him the coveted Thomas Jefferson Cup.

Despite the accolades, Carter remains humble to the point of shyness and has somehow avoided the spotlight more often than he has been in it. He seems more comfortable talking about deficit irrigation, fruit set and the intricacies of blending than broadcasting his own impressive track record.

Blending is Carter's forte, and turns a disadvantage (lack of estate-grown fruit) into an asset. He sources most of his grapes from Yakima Valley vineyards, showing off the valley's cooler-climate flavors in his Euro-styled blends. That generally translates into wines with moderate alcohol levels (averaging around 13.5 percent), sharp acids and a laudable restraint with new oak. His most affordable (and justifiably popular) wine is named Abracadabra. "I overbuy everything," Carter explains, "so I can have maximum flexibility blending [the main] Brian Carter wines. The rest goes into Abracadabra — same wines, same barrels." Abracadabra (\$20) is what I



GORDON KING / YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC, 2004

Brian Carter, former vice president of Apex Cellars, is now pouring a mix of blended wines for his own winery, Brian Carter Cellars.

call a "kitchen sink" wine, mixing numerous vineyards and varieties. In 2005, notes Carter, seven types of grapes "went into the cauldron." Abracadabra's magic is that the finished wine always adds up to something more than a mishmash. The latest displays lovely, ripe fruit; polished tannins; and a lengthy, tasty finish of chocolate-covered cherries.

The Brian Carter Cellars 2006 Oriana White (\$24) is a captivating blend of roussanne, viognier and riesling. Lovely scents of citrus blossom, lemon wax and tea open into a fleshy, luxurious mid-palate, bursting with fruits.

Byzance is Brian Carter Cellars' southern Rhone red blend, a variable mix of grenache, syrah and mourvèdre. The seductive 2004 Byzance (\$30) offers myriad pleasures, from its floral underpinnings to flavors of fresh red apples, tart berries and plums.

L'Etalon is its Bordeaux-styled cousin. The 2004 L'Etalon (\$30) is three-quarters cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc, with merlot and petit verdot completing the mix. It's a sexy, graceful wine whose flavors evolve through mixed berry/cherry fruits and on into plum, coffee, cocoa and spice.

First of the 2005 reds is the Brian Carter Cellars 2005 Tutturosso (\$30), a Super Tuscan-style blend of sangiovese, cabernet sauvignon and syrah. Tangy acids support plummy fruit, and scents of sandalwood add complexity.

All these wines are distributed by Vehrs, and may also be purchased at the winery tasting room.