

Great Northwest Wine: Young winemaker makes most of American dream



Victor Palencia holds a bottle of his Palencia Wine Co. in front of his Walla Walla winery. The drawing on the label depicts his father with a shovel as he works the fields of Yakima Valley.

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Born in 1985 in Michoacán, Mexico, Palencia emigrated to the United States when he was 2 years old. His father wanted a better life for his family and came to the Yakima Valley, where he picked up a shovel and began working in the region's mint fields. Eventually, the elder Palencia moved into orchard and vineyard work.

While most high schoolers fill their after-school hours participating in sports, working at fast-food restaurants or playing video games, Victor Palencia headed to the vineyards with his father to help support his family. This is where his love for wine began.

After graduating from Prosser High School in 2003, Palencia became the first in his family to go to college. He earned his winemaking degree from Walla Walla Community College, thanks in part to a scholarship from Leonetti Cellar. During his time in the Walla Walla Valley, he worked for such wineries as Saviah Cellars, Sleight of Hand Cellars, Basel Cellars and Zerba Cellars.

After graduation, he returned to Prosser, where he was hired as assistant winemaker at Willow Crest Winery. This landed Palencia in *The New York Times*, which wrote a feature on him because he was an underage winemaker who couldn't legally taste what he produced.

Two years later, Palencia was hired as director of winemaking at J&S Crushing, a custom winemaking facility in Mattawa, where he also produces the wine for Jones of Washington and several other clients. In total, Palencia is responsible for more than a million cases of wine.

In September 2013, Palencia came full circle, opening Palencia Wine Co. at Walla Walla Regional Airport (while also keeping his day job in Mattawa) — a few weeks after attending his 10-year high school reunion.

Palencia's first releases have been nothing short of superb, following the success he has shown with Jones of Washington. Here are a few of his latest wines, which we've tasted recently. Ask for them at your favorite wine merchant or contact the winery directly.

Palencia Wine Co. 2012 Casa Amarilla, Yakima Valley, \$36: Palencia's new Rhône-style blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre comes from his high school stomping grounds around the Yakima Valley town of Prosser. Aromas of dark and dusty blue fruit, allspice, clove and fresh-baked brownies lead to broad flavors of ripe dark fruit. It's all backed with mild tannins and bright acidity. (14 percent alcohol)

Palencia Wine Co. 2013 El Viñador Tempranillo, Ancient Lakes of Columbia Valley, \$50: Palencia's first effort with this classic Spanish red variety is a beauty. It opens with aromas of Rainier cherry, black pepper and a hint of caramel. Bright red fruit highlights the palate, with flavors of ripe strawberry, raspberry and rhubarb. It's all backed by well-integrated tannins and perfectly balanced acidity.

Palencia Wine Co. 2013 Albariño, Ancient Lakes of Columbia Valley, \$18: Albariño is still a rare white variety in the Northwest, but wines like this will go a long way toward bringing it into the mainstream. It opens with aromas of dusty lemon, pineapple, pear, gooseberry, lime peel and the dusty minerality found so often in white wines from this emerging Columbia Basin region. The drink is clean, refreshing and driven by citrus as the blast of acidity is rounded out ever so slightly by the finish of lemon bars. (13 percent alcohol)

Vino La Monarcha 2013 Pinot Grigio, Columbia Valley, \$15: Palencia's second label pays tribute to the monarch butterfly, which migrates north from his birthplace of Michoacán, Mexico. It's a dazzling wine with aromas of citrus and cardamom along with apricot, cotton candy, rose petal and spearmint. It's a fun drink that's loaded with white peach, tangerine and sweet herbs. Enjoy this with grilled fish or green salads. (12.3 percent alcohol)