



Merlot Sees Its Stock Rise After Years In The Shadow Of Cabernet And Pinot

Brian Freedman, CONTRIBUTOR *I cover food, wine, drinks, travel; host dinners; and consult on wine*

Somerston "Stornoway" Merlot 2013 (SRP \$90) -

Higher-toned cherry, blueberry, and raspberry are complicated with sandalwood, charred vanilla, chocolate ganache, and lilacs in this red. This will unfold beautifully over the next couple of decades.

California Merlot, for years, has been famously down on its proverbial luck. What once was wildly popular had become something that so-called "serious" wine drinkers tended not to purchase. Which is ironic, since Merlot, at least in Bordeaux, is responsible for a key aspect of the blend of the majority of wines from the Right Bank, some of the most venerated and highly sought after in the world. Château Pétrus, for example—arguably the single greatest expression of the grape variety in the world—can cost thousands of dollars a bottle in a good year.

But that hadn't stopped the slide in the reputation of California Merlot. Unlike common wisdom, however, that decline in Merlot's prestige and sales did not wholly result from the release of the movie "Sideways" in 2004—the film's protagonist famously venerates Pinot Noir and bashes Merlot—but, rather, was caused by a confluence of factors years in the making.

Elias Fernandez, legendary winemaker at Shafer Vineyards in the Napa Valley, explained that, once Cabernet Sauvignon began to be planted in the proper places, its stock began to skyrocket. "Different parts of the Napa Valley were being discovered. There [were] more appellations where Cabernet was a major force in it. So it focused peoples attention to Cabernet away from Merlot," he said. "And then Merlot that was being grown in some right, great places were actually taken out because Cabernet was becoming such a popular thing that you could get more money for it, so Merlot was kind of being pulled out of hillsides, and anywhere it had been planted, to make room for Cabernet," he continued. "Sideways," Fernandez added, then resulted, from his perspective, in a younger generation of wine lovers shying away from Merlot in favor of Pinot Noir, Cabernet, or other red wines.

That Merlot malaise lasted for years—indeed, it's effects are still felt today. But after tasting dozens of wines, and speaking with a number of producers, it has become apparent that California Merlot is in the middle of a comeback. The quality is stunning, prices are reasonable, and winemakers are lavishing plenty of attention on the wines made from this once-misunderstood grape variety.

After decades spent in the shadow of Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, California Merlot is poised for a resurgence. When planted in the best locations, like this vineyard site on Mt. Veeder, that will eventually find its way into a bottle of Mt. Brave, the grape variety is capable of greatness (Credit: Mt. Brave).

Alex Ryan, President and CEO of Duckhorn Wine Company, which has for decades been one of the leading producers of high-quality Merlot in the United States, explained to me in an email that, "Interestingly, I think the impact of 'Sideways' was ultimately positive for Merlot. It separated the pretenders from the contenders in terms of the wineries that are really committed to making great Merlot. When you experience that kind of revitalized focus on quality, it's good for consumers, and for the category as a whole."

Ryan continued, “As a result, there are some very positive Merlot trends afoot, especially in the \$20+ SRP luxury red wine segment. Currently, Merlot is the second leading red varietal after Cabernet Sauvignon purchased in the U.S. In California alone, which is certainly a hotbed of wine connoisseurs, Merlot consumption was at approximately 18 million cases in 2014, having grown dramatically from the 2.8 million cases in 1994 (Source: The Wine Institute). Nationally, in the Luxury Merlot category (\$20+ SRP) off-premise sales are +5% in the last year (Source: IRI US Food Data). For on-premise sales, consumers are placing an ever higher value on Merlot. Merlot prices by the bottle have risen 4% in the past year to \$67.09 from \$64.37. Merlot by the glass prices have risen 3% in the past year to \$10.96 from \$10.68. Overall, Merlot comprises about 10% of all fine dining placements, and along with Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, is one of the three most important varietal red wines in restaurants (Source: Winemetrics 2015 US Fine Dining Report). Simply put, this is an exciting time for Merlot, especially for wineries like Duckhorn Vineyards that are really dedicated to the variety.”

Tyler Thomas, winemaker at Dierberg and Star Lane Vineyards in Santa Barbara, sees the situation a bit differently, but he is still optimistic about Merlot’s prospects. “I think it is difficult for me to conclude Merlot is a ‘growing’ category,” he wrote in an email. “However, that doesn't mean there isn't some excitement around Merlot. I think enough distance has been created from Merlot bashing days for it to be poised for a renaissance. Our demand for Merlot has crept up, but I can say more definitively that people who are trying our Merlot are realizing how lovely it can be and shedding their preconceived notions about what it may once have been.”

Those preconceived notions—that Merlot is a simple wine, fruity and easy to drink yet not all that complex—are demonstrably false. Merlot, Thomas pointed out, is just as expressive of the place in which it is planted as Cabernet Sauvignon. “We believe our sites are demonstrating that Merlot's charm can be quite serious (fresh, tense, and pure) and make something that is perhaps less brooding than Cabernet but no less interesting or complex,” he noted. “For consumers this offers an excellent opportunity to explore serious Bordeaux-varietal wine that is a touch more approachable, and certainly more affordable.”

I certainly found that to be the case over the course of tasting Merlot from California for this piece. (There are also plenty of fantastic blends that focus on Merlot but that don’t have the necessary 75% of it to be labeled as such—Blackbird’s stunning 2013 Arise and 2013 Illustration bottlings are prime examples of this, as is Robert Mondavi Winery’s 2013 Maestro, among many others). Below are 16 standouts, listed alphabetically. It’s not an exhaustive list—there is far too much delicious Merlot in California right now for any collection to include them all, including some older vintages, like the phenomenal 2009 from Madonna Estate in Carneros—but they do constitute an excellent starting point. These wines represent a broad selection in terms of price and availability, in order to more fully express the range of options available right now.