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# WINE ENTHUSIAST

SEPTEMBER 2015

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## Under \$25

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## Take Root

Merlot is particular about where it's planted. In the Napa Valley, many, including Myers, point to Oak Knoll as a sweet spot for the grape, where it tends to set an even crop and the temperatures are relatively cool.

"It's the right amount of heat," Myers says. "You get the velvety texture, nice color and structure, that plummy-ness, cherry, a dustiness sometimes, maybe *herbes de Provence*, a complex mélange of fruit without any vegetative quality or the tannins of Cabernet Sauvignon, not Kool-Aid, candied Merlot."

Carneros can also be a healthy spot for Merlot, though it's even more site-specific. The variety doesn't fare well in the region's deep, nitrogenous soils, where it can take on too much herbaceousness.

## A Fickle Grape

Winemakers often find Merlot to be harder to grow and make than Cabernet Sauvignon. When planted in heavy soils, the grapes won't impart berry flavors as much as a leafy earthiness akin to decomposing leaves. In too-hot areas, Merlot may take on a weedy character.

"With Cabernet, you have more latitude to get it ripe," Myers says. "It will move through the herbaceousness to develop berry flavors."

Winemaker Chris Louton at St. Francis Winery & Vineyards in Sonoma, which makes a vineyard-designate from the Behler Vineyard in addition to other Merlots, agrees that Merlot can be trickier than Cabernet.

"During fermentation, being cautious to not overextract tannin while maximizing color stability is the biggest challenge," he says. "When that's achieved, Merlot can be an extremely exciting variety to enjoy. The secret is getting the body of the wine to be complete, from start to finish. Sometimes Merlot can have great fruit-forward aromas and have a great entry and finish on the palate, but have a hollow middle."

According to Louton, consumer interest in Merlot is being re-established, especially as restaurateurs and retailers recognize that a producer's passion for Merlot runs deep.

"We see some people who went from Merlot to Pinot Noir [are] rediscovering Merlot and being fairly surprised by the quality," says Nolque. "It works well by the glass at less than \$15, or in the high end by the bottle. The remaining faithful drinkers have trended up and are more selective."

## Merlot's Quiet Comeback

While it may have fallen out fashion, a small band of California winemakers who never lost faith in the grape are creating some of the world's most complex Merlots.

BY VIRGINIE BOONE

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### Is California Merlot back?

Well, sort of. There may not be as much of it as there once was, before consumer backlash and the Pinot Noir renaissance took hold. But what's left is better than ever—and can be truly exceptional.

“We all know what happened to the variety,” says Pierre Noique, vice president of luxury wines at **Constellation Brands**, which owns **Robert Mondavi Winery** and **Franciscan Estate**, among others, in the Napa Valley.

“In speaking with restaurateurs around the country, Merlot is in a bit of a unique situation,” he says. “It was one of the hottest varieties before 2004, then it came to a screeching halt and the Merlot crisis eliminated all the producers who weren't

serious, and only the high-quality, truly committed remained. A lot had jumped on the

bandwagon and flooded the market with mediocre, green, unripe [wines].”

These days, Noique sees high-quality offerings on wine lists around the country from the likes of **Duckhorn Vineyards, Twomey**, Franciscan Estate, **Lewis Cellars, Pahlmeyer, Shafer, Cakebread Cellars, Chappellet** and **Whitehall Lane**, all Napa Valley producers.

“If it’s Merlot, it has to be Napa to sell, preferably from a recognizable winery,” Noique says.

“People are still looking for Merlot for the same reason they are looking for Pinot Noir: approachable, smooth, fruity and fairly low in tannins.”

## **The Rise and Fall of Merlot**

The lower-priced category of Merlot was a pretty mixed bag back when overplanting was rampant, even from Napa. But a marketplace correction may be the best thing that ever happened for consumers, who can now find good Merlot for under \$25.

“In the last 10 years, winemakers didn’t feel any differently about Merlot,” says Janet Myers, general manager and director of winemaking for Franciscan Estate. “But there was a winnowing down, some of the worst of it got pulled out, and what was left was the best Merlot. The quality went up, though quantities went down.”

Ironically, Merlot was blended with Pinot Noir once Pinot’s demand exploded, as producers needed to stretch what they had.

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“Pinot didn’t taste like Pinot in some cases, it gets so dominated by whatever variety you blend with it,” Myers says. “Pinot started getting bland, and people said, ‘Maybe I’ll look at Merlot again.’”

Statistics confirm that notion, with Merlot representing 8.3 percent of wine sales by volume last year, compared with Pinot Noir’s 4.6 percent, according to Nielsen. Chardonnay dominated the market with 19.4 percent of sales, with Cabernet Sauvignon second at 13.3 percent.

## **Growth Spurt**

For 2012, the California Agricultural Statistics Service reports that Napa Valley accounts for the second most Merlot acreage of any region in California (after the San Joaquin Valley), with 5,976 acres planted. Sonoma County is third at 5,778 acres.

Franciscan produces a Napa Valley Merlot for \$21, as well as a high-end proprietary blend, Magnificat, which is made up of approximately 20 percent Merlot. Franciscan will soon debut its first reserve Merlot, a 2013 vintage, focused on the restaurant market.

“Restaurants have always understood that Merlot is food-friendly, versatile,” Myers says. “It’s always been an important blender, but it’s not a second thought for us. It’s a beautiful grape, full-stop.”

## **Cream of the Crop**

In the upper reaches of the Napa Valley, near Calistoga, three spindly palm trees rise out of the ground within a sea of grapes, the telltale landmark of one of Merlot’s happiest locations.

Known appropriately as Three Palms Vineyard, 73 acres of wine grapes are planted here. Fifty of them are Merlot.

Duckhorn Vineyards founder Dan Duckhorn released his inaugural Three Palms Vineyard Merlot in 1978, charging \$12.50 per bottle, an astronomical price at the time.

“We wanted people to understand that it was a Merlot of exceptional quality,” he says. “This message connected with people.”

After sourcing from the vineyard for 37 years, Duckhorn Wine Company bought the legendary vineyard early this year. Duckhorn’s inspiration has always been Château Pétrus, the famous 100-percent Merlot from Pomerol. His team continues to benchmark their wines against it, aiming to make first-growth Napa Valley Merlot.

San Francisco socialite Lillie Hitchcock Coit, of Coit Tower fame, planted the now-famous palms around her vacation home in the late 1800s. In 1967, the land was bought by the Upton family, who planted grapes on it the following year, sensing great potential in its rocky, alluvial soils, the land covered in volcanic stones.

“It’s unique for Merlot,” says Duckhorn winemaker Renée Ary. “It usually likes free-draining soils with moisture retention. Three Palms goes against that. I’ve yet to find a better place for Merlot.”

The rockiness gives the Merlot an austere structure, Ary says, as the vines are used to being stressed. At Three Palms, the grapes ripen early and evenly, the site’s warmth promoting flowering earlier than other Merlot sites that she sources in the Napa Valley. Block Five is her favorite.

“The grapes are a little bit denser, darker and yet still have a velvety silkiness and roundness,” Ary says.

## A Bright Future

Ary and the Duckhorn team took over full-time farming of Three Palms and its fruit in 2011 after wineries like **Sterling** and **Provenance** pulled out. Most of the vines were planted in 1993 and 1994, with additional blocks added in 1997 and 1999.

Since gaining control of the vineyard, Duckhorn’s Napa Valley Merlot has improved. A greater proportion of it is now composed of Merlot from Three Palms, in addition to vineyards in Howell Mountain, Carneros, Yountville and Atlas Peak.

It’s been the number-one restaurant Merlot for many years, according to the 2014 Winemetrics On-Premise Distribution Report. Merlot is the third most popular red wine in restaurants, behind Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, according to the report.

“We had noticed the Merlot section on wine lists getting shorter,” says Carol C. Reber, Duckhorn’s senior vice president of marketing and business development. “There were a couple of years when young, sophisticated people from [places like] San Francisco weren’t sure if they should like Merlot or not. No more. The Silicon Valley people coming up to the Napa Valley in droves are embracing it full tilt.”

## Under \$25

**Kendall-Jackson 2012 Vintner’s Reserve Merlot (Sonoma County)**; 90 points, \$24. Expressive in leathery plum and blueberry aromas and flavors, with a soft, spicy streak that lifts the experience, this wine finishes in a dusting of cocoa powder.

**Pedroncelli 2012 Bench Vineyards Merlot (Dry Creek Valley)**; 89 points, \$16. Juicy in red plum and subtle suggestions of herb and cinnamon spice, this will please a wide range of palates and pocketbooks, the wine given a year in American oak.

**Chelsea Goldschmidt 2012 Merlot (Alexander Valley)**; 88 points, \$18. A collaboration between winemaker Nick Goldschmidt and his daughter Chelsea, this 100% Merlot delivers great value. Oaky in plummy black fruit and tobacco, it shows a touch of cedar and clove amid mountainous tannins.

**Folie à Deux 2012 Merlot (Alexander Valley)**; 88 points, \$19. Dense and juicy, this wine is abundant in black cherry, plum and chocolate and does a good job reining in the sweetness of

its ripe fruit. Leathery and oaky on the palate, give it a mighty swirl in the glass for its medium body and lengthy finish to shine.

**Robert Mondavi 2012 Merlot (Napa Valley);** 88 points, \$23. Pungent clove and cinnamon appear on the entry of this medium-bodied wine, which offers smooth, rounded tannins and subtle oak. Plum, raspberry and tobacco all make an appearance, finished off by a healthy dose of black pepper.

**Ca'Momi 2013 Merlot (Napa Valley);** 87 points, \$22. Minty with ripe, black plum and cherry notes, this rich, opulent wine is still puckering in tannins, but shows measured acidity on the back palate and finish. Toasty oak makes its presence felt, providing flavor and fullness.

**Cline 2012 Estate Grown Merlot (Sonoma Coast);** 87 points, \$18. Black olive, blackberry and smoky charcuterie make this an interesting wine, coming from the cooler confines of Carneros, where it meets the sprawling Sonoma Coast. Austere, the midpalate delves into coffee and chocolate notes.

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**Franciscan 2012 Merlot (Napa Valley);** 87 points, \$21. Medium in build, with soft, approachable layers of texture and tannin, this wine is big on blackberry and black olive, successfully blending sweet and savory. It builds tension as it goes, finishing with a taste of smoky leather.

**Frei Brothers 2013 Reserve Merlot (Dry Creek Valley);** 87 points, \$20. Rich in plum, black cherry and blackberry, this wine is subtle in cinnamon spice and dried herb, with additional embellishments of leather and earth. Soft and subdued, it's approachable and versatile.

**Kirkland Signature 2013 Signature Series Merlot (Oakville);** 87 points, \$15. Cherry, raspberry and vanilla combine for an inviting mix of ripeness and sweet bouquet, a fruity component that sits nicely atop a structured wine marked by soft, fine tannins. The finish is robust in black pepper and clove.

**Napa Cellars 2012 Merlot (Napa Valley);** 87 points, \$19. Chocolate and raspberry join

forces in this jammy, soft and round wine that's sizable yet approachable. This is a good go-to for midweek meals and parties, with a medium body and respectable finish that will pair with a wide range of foods.

### **\$25–\$50**

**Black Stallion 2012 Limited Release Merlot (Napa Valley);** 91 points, \$40. Smooth and round, this is a well-structured wine, amply blessed in black cherry, plum and spicy cinnamon. Made in small quantities, it does the variety justice, offering something less extreme than Cabernet, and fully ready for the table.

**Darioush 2012 Merlot (Napa Valley);** 91 points, \$50. Velvety and seductive, this is a fine example of the variety's sultriness, a study in ripe black cherry, clove and cinnamon that's generous in tannin without getting obscene. With a decant or couple swirls of the glass, expect the power to soften and the complexity to take on new vigor.

**Starmont 2012 Merlot (Carneros);** 91 points, \$27. From the Napa side of Carneros, this Merlot is blended with 1% Petit Verdot, which presumably has added a smidgen of weight and color to the mix. Super soft, it offers round, ripe cherry and blueberry notes, with ample acidity, textured tannins and a strong finish awash in mocha.

**St. Francis 2012 Behler Vineyard Merlot (Sonoma Valley);** 90 points, \$45. Soft and subdued in black fruit and leather, along with tufts of tobacco and clove, this wine contains an unexpected 4% Zinfandel, which may well add to both the brawniness of the oak and tannin and the juicy core of fruit that keeps it lifted on the palate. Cellar through 2017. Cellar Selection.

**St. Supéry 2012 Estate Merlot (Rutherford);** 90 points, \$50. Licorice and black plum give this wine a sultry edge, layered around generous tannin and leathery tobacco. Soft toward the finish, it provides a polished note of red currant and raspberry midway through, lifting much of the weight off the tongue. Cellar through 2020. Cellar Selection.

**Y. Rousseau 2012 Pépé Cavedale Vineyard Merlot (Moon Mountain District);** 90 points, \$50. Named for the producer's French grandfather, who loved Merlot, this 100% varietal wine from a high-elevation site is leathery and meaty, quite debonair. With a scent of bacon grease giving it a sense of rustic deliciousness, it's also soft and unctuous on the palate, medium to full-bodied.

### **Over \$50**



Duckhorn 2012 Three Palms Merlot (Napa Valley); 93 points, \$95. From one of the best-known sites for the variety in the Napa Valley, this wine shows classic structure, with an almost dusty quality to the well-integrated and resolved tannins. Concentrated, it shows a density of red fruit that remains in balance with its more rugged minerality, remaining soft on the palate throughout. Drink now through 2025. Cellar Selection.

**Pride Mountain 2012 Vintner Select Merlot (Sonoma County)**; 93 points, \$80. A 100% varietal wine, grown in an area called the Lower Mountaintop, there's a compelling candied cherry and raspberry element here, supported by complex accents of vanilla and cured meat. With plenty of body to stay fresh and vibrant on the palate, it never gets bogged down, finishing in richer components of dark chocolate and oak.

**Tamber Bey 2012 Merlot (Yountville)**; 91 points \$75. Black pepper and thick smoke accentuate the bouquet of this cinnamon-spiced wine, rounded in taste by red plum and dark chocolate. Soft and juicy on the front palate, it will benefit from opening further, suggesting either decanting or cellaring through 2020. The wine is blended with 7% Cabernet Sauvignon. Cellar Selection.

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