



Merlot



Introduction

- Merlot is a relatively recent grape variety. The first mention of it is in 1784 in France's Bordeaux region.
- The name comes from the French word "merle" meaning "blackbird." It's not known if the name refers to the color of the berries, or the fact that blackbirds have a particular fondness for the tasty grape.
- Merlot is one of the five major Bordeaux varieties. Covering 721,000 acres, Merlot is the second most planted red wine grape in the world, ranked just behind Cabernet Sauvignon.

Merlot Facts

- According to researchers at UC-Davis, Merlot's parentage is Cabernet Franc (which is also a parent of Cabernet Sauvignon) and a very old decorative grape variety known as Magdeleine Noire des Charentes.
- You may have heard the terms "Left Bank" and "Right Bank" used to describe areas within Bordeaux. This refers to either side of the Gironde River and its two subsidiaries, the Dordogne and Garonne, which run through the region. The southwest, or left, bank of the river produces wines that are dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon with lesser amounts of Merlot blended in. On the right bank, the opposite is true. Wines from this area tend to contain a larger percentage of Merlot, with varying amounts of Cab Sauvignon and Cab Franc added to give the wines structure and depth.

Merlot Facts

- Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon have an affinity for each other, and where one is grown, you will usually find the other. Merlot is often blended in small amounts with Cab to soften the wine so it can be drunk earlier. Conversely, many Merlot dominant wines are blended with a small amount of Cab to shore up the structure, and to allow for longer cellaring.
- Areas that produce some of the best Merlot include California, France, Washington State, and – believe it or not – Italy. If you are looking for good quality Merlot at an affordable price, Washington's offerings, in particular, are popular with consumers.

Sensory Characteristics

- Merlot is a thinner skinned grape with larger berries than its cousin, Cabernet Sauvignon. Because the skins are thinner, the wine produced has less tannins and tends to be softer and fruitier, although it does share some of the same aromas and flavors as Cabernet, including black cherry, currant, chocolate, cedar, and tobacco.
- The best examples of Merlot can be difficult to differentiate from Cab Sauvignon.

The First Signs of Trouble...

- 1956 – In February, a deep freeze hits France. Because they bud earlier, many Merlot and Malbec grape vines were destroyed. After the severe frost, Malbec was all but abandoned in Bordeaux. However, many vintners replanted Merlot vines, only to have them later destroyed by rot. This trend of colder, wetter Spring weather continues throughout much of the 1960s.
- 1970 – After several failed vintages, France bans new plantings of Merlot, however, in 1975 voted to allow it again.
- 1990s – After a story is shown on “60 Minutes” about the benefits of drinking red wine, the market is flooded with an abundance of mediocre, mass produced wine. Merlot gains popularity as an easy drinking varietal.

2004: The “Sideways Effect”

- In 2004, a popular wine-themed movie called “Sideways” was released. In it, one of the main characters, Miles Raymond, just before walking into a restaurant, emphatically states to his friend, “If anyone orders Merlot, I’m leaving! I am NOT drinking any #&^%#@#% Merlot!!”
- Miles at one point also unceremoniously dumps a glass of Cab Franc, claiming “I’ve come to never expect greatness from Cabernet Franc, and this one is no different.”
- In a later scene, the same character goes on to gush over his love of Pinot Noir, whose flavors he describes as “the most haunting and brilliant and subtle and thrilling and ancient on the planet.”

The “Sideways Effect”

- The effect of these few lines of dialog had an impact on wine sales for years to come. Although Merlot had been on a downhill slide prior to the release of “Sideways,” the movie was simply another nail in the coffin. Merlot sales slumped further, while at the same time there was increased demand for Pinot Noir, a varietal which previously had been all but ignored in the U.S.
- At the time, many California grape growers replaced their Merlot plantings with other up and coming varieties. A few Merlot-centric wineries went out of business.
- Ironically, the Miles Raymond character, who expresses such disdain for Merlot and Cabernet Franc, later goes on to admit that he has a prized bottle of 1961 Chateau Cheval Blanc he is saving for a special occasion. The irony is that Cheval Blanc is a blend of – surprise – Merlot and Cab Franc!

The “Sideways Effect”

- It was not immediately clear to most viewers why the character in the film had such an aversion to Merlot. Some thought it was because Merlot was popular at the time of the movie’s release, and the majority of it was mediocre. This is true to some extent. But the real reason was only revealed in the Rex Pickett book that inspired the movie. In it, Miles had recently split with his wife. Merlot was his wife’s favorite wine, and his prized bottle of Cheval Blanc was one he had bought to celebrate their 10th anniversary, which of course never came. It wasn’t that Miles hated Merlot. It was that Merlot was a reminder of his failed marriage.

So is Merlot Really That Bad?

- The short answer: no. It can actually be pretty darned good.
- Since the initial backlash from the movie “Sideways,” Merlot has made a resurgence. Sales are now almost back to where they were prior to its release.
- Some of the most expensive wines in the world are made from Merlot, including Chateau Petrus, which commands an average price of \$2600 a bottle.
- The number one wine on Wine Spectator’s Top 100 of 2017 is Duckhorn Three Palms Vineyard Merlot.
- Strangely, most Merlot tends to fall into the under-\$20 or over-\$50 price range. There is not a lot of mid-priced Merlot on the market.

Questions?



Wine 1: 2016 WB Bridgman Merlot

- Produced in Washington's Columbia Valley, Bridgman is 100% Merlot.
- According to Wine Enthusiast, who rated it 87 points, "An early red release from the vintage, this is light in color and notably blue fruited for a Merlot, with spice and orange peel accents. The flavors bring more of the same, adding boysenberry and plum notes that coat the palate before tapering on the finish. You'd never have it pegged as Merlot, but it's tasty all the same."
- \$16.99 at Total Wine



Wine 2: 2014 Chateau Roquevieille

- Produced in Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux, this wine is a blend of %70 Merlot, %15 Cab Franc, and 15% Cab Sauvignon.
- Wine Spectator rated it 90 points, calling it “Polished, with an ample toasty frame as the ganache notes ride alongside the dark plum and blackberry fruit. The finish is laced with singed juniper and bay accents, adding range and depth. Well done. Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. Drink now through 2024. Tasted twice, with consistent notes.”
- \$16.99 at Total Wine



Wine 3: 2014 Rutherford Hill Merlot

- Produced in Napa Valley, Rutherford Hill is predominantly Merlot, blended with a small amount of Syrah and Cab Sauvignon.
- From the winemaker's notes "This is an elegantly refined blend of classic Bordeaux varietals that create a beautiful bouquet of rich aromas and prolonged flavors. Lavish cherry fruit flavors are backed by a rich, balanced structure for an intensely complex Merlot. Silky, full-flavored, firm, and built for today's enjoyment, the wine finishes with smooth tannins and intricate layers of flavor on the palate."
- \$18.99 at Total Wine



Wine 4: 2015 Le Volte dell'Ornellaia

- This wine comes from Tuscany, and is a blend of 67% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 13% Sangiovese.
- From Natalie MacLean “Le Volte is dry, medium-bodied with red berry, tobacco leaf and savoury spice on the palate. Nicely balanced and structured. Drink now and for the next 10 years. Pair with game dishes. Score 90/100.”
- \$29.99 at France 44



Wine 5: 2014 Pahlmeyer Merlot

- Produced in Napa Valley, Pahlmeyer is 94.5% Merlot, with the remaining percentage coming from Petit Verdot and Malbec.
- From critic James Suckling: “Blackberries, blueberries, forest floor and hints of Spanish cedar. Full-bodied and tight with firm and silky tannins and long and beautiful focus. Goes on for minutes. Terrific wine. Drink or hold. Score: 97 points.”
- Scored 94 points by Robert Parker.
- \$79.99 at Total Wine

