MERLOT’S QUIET COMEBACK

While it may have fallen out of 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
PHOTOS BY AARON GRAUBART

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 knew what happened to the variety,” says Pierre Nazaire, vice president of luxury wines at Constellation Brands, which owns Robert Mondavi Winery and Francisca 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 wine.”

These days, Nazaire sees high-quality offerings on wine lists around the country from the likes of Duckhorn Vineyards, Trione, Franciscan Estate, Lewis Cellars, Pahlmeyer, Shultz, Cakesbread Cellars, Chappellet and Whitetail Lane, all Napa Valley producers.

“If it’s Merlot, it has to be Napa to sell, preferably from a recognizable winery,” Nazaire 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 big buzz bomb when over-stocking was rampant throughout North America, and expectation correction may be the best thing that ever happened for consumers, who can now find good Merlot for under $12.

In the last 10 years, winemakers didn’t talk very much about Merlot,” says Ken Myers, general manager and director of business development for Francis Ford Coppola. “But there was a downward slide on the amount of good Merlot out there, and now what is out there is good Merlot. The quality went up, though quantities went down.”

Originally, Merlot was blended with Pinot Noir once Pinot’s demand exploded, as producers needed to offset their Cabernet that they had. “Pinot didn’t taste like Pinot in some cases, it gets so dominated by whatever variety you blend it with,” says Myers. “Pinot started getting bland, and people said, ‘Maybe let’s look at Merlot again.’”

Statistics confirm that notion, with Merlot representing 23.5 percent of wine sales by volume last year, compared with Pinot Noir’s 4.6 percent, according to Nielsen. Chardonnay dominated the market with 23 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-highest Merlot sale area of any region in California (after the Sonoma Coast), with 1,209 acres planted. Sonoma County is third, at 1,271 acres.

Franciscan produces a Napa Valley Merlot for $15, as well as a high-end proprietary blend, Magpie, which is made up of approximately 20 percent Merlot. Franciscan will soon debut its first reserve Merlot in 2013, focused on the restaurant market.

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

The Grape

Merlot is particular about where it’s planted. In the Napa Valley, many, including Myers, point to Calistoga as an area where the grape, which tends to set an even crop and the temperatures are relatively cooled.

“It’s the sweet amount of acidity,” Myers says. “You get the velvety texture, nice color and structure that plumminess has, cherry, a little bit of red currant sometimes, and soft tannins. Before Cabernet Sauvignon, a complete meal can be enjoyed without any vegetative quality or the tannins of Cabernet Sauvignon, not too hard, medium-bodied, medium acidity.”

Cabernet can also be a healthy spot for Merlot, though it’s even more speculative. The variety doesn’t fare well in the regions that nitrate soils, where it can take on too much herbaceousness.

A Fickle Grape

Winemakers often find Merlot to be harder to grow and more than Cabernet Sauvignon. When planted in heavy soils, the grapes won’t impart berry flavors as much as a deep, earthy woody akin to resounding barns. In top-notch areas, Merlot can take on a waxy character.

“With Cabernet, you have more latitude to get it right,” Myers says. “It will move through the terroir and allow the berry flavors.”

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

“During fermentation, being cautious to not over-extract too much IDC may minimize color intensity in 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 aromatics and have a great entry and finish on the palate, but have a hollow middle.”

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

“We see consumers who want to learn about Merlot to丰富 their palates and discovery a Merlot and are fairly satisfied by the quality,” says Loupourt. “It works well with the prices at less than $15, or in the high end for the bottle. The remaining division for the remaining lower-end and extreme values.”
Cream of the Crop

In the upper reaches of the Napa Valley, near Calistoga, three closely plumed trees rise out of the ground. From a sea of grapes, the hallowed vineyards of one of Merlot's popular 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 1996, charging $42.00 per bottle, an astronomical price at the time.

"We wanted people to understand that if I was a Merlot of exceptional quality," he says, "This message connected with people.

After sourcing from the vineyard for 37 years, Duckhorn Wine Company is one of the legendary winemakers who provide 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 Cox, of Karl Toyer farms, planted the now-famous vines around her vacation home in the late 1800s. In 1893, the land was bought by the Lipton family, who planted grapes on the following year, sending great potential its way. "Look south to the land covered in white oak trees," says "It's unlike for Merlot," says Duckhorn winemaker Randy Ayrault.

"It usually takes four-vineyard soils with moderate retentions. Three Palms, scientifically, is the greatest place to find a better place to grow Merlot."

The rockiness gives the Merlot an exciting structure. Says Ayrault, "as the wines are used to being stressed. At Three Palms, the grapes grow at a very high intensity, the vine's weight promoting flowering so well among other Merlot sites that she sources in the Napa Valley, Black Hills, and other varieties.

The grapes are a little bit darker, denser and yet still have a velvety richness and roundness," says Ayrault.

A Bright Future

And the Duckhorn team took over full-time farming of Three Palms and its roots in 2011 after winemaker Dan Petroski jumped on board. Most of the wines were planted in 1993 and 1994, with additions 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 comprised of Merlot from Three Palms, in addition to vineyards in Howell Mountain, Carneros, Napa Valley, and Atlas Peak.

It's been the number-one restaurant Merlot for many years, according to the 2014 Wine Enthusiast Wine & Spirits Report. Merlot is the third most popular red wine in restaurants, behind Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, according to the report.

"We've noticed the Merlot section of wine lists getting shorter," says Carol C. Robbyn, 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 so much or they should Merlot or not. No more. The Silicon Valley crowd are coming up to the Napa Valley. In droves. It's embracing it full force.