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Merlot's Moment in the Sun

How California's leading red wine grape varietal got its groove back by taking the high road

BY ALISON CLARE STEINGOLD

If anyone orders merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any [expletive] merlot!"

When Paul Giamatti delivered his infamous punchline in 2004's *Sideways*, the collective snicker of wine's intelligentsia was practically audible in theaters from Santa Rosa to Santa Ynez. For all his bitter banter, the *ne plus ultra* of wine-making after which "Miles" lusted—a '61 Cheval Blanc—was none other than a much-maligned Merlot.


Dramatic irony aside, Miles wasn't completely off the mark. For the world's most ubiquitous and forgiving varietal, there are "two" Merlots. Consider, first, what could be called *little m* merlot: a plummy liquid grown in bulk and relegated to gallery openings. Its color looks about right; the bottle is the proper lean shape. That said, it's fleshy—like Welch's but without the pucker.

Then there's *big M* Merlot. From those gravelly, hefty soils of right-bank Bordeaux comes a velvety, old-world treasure. It waits patiently in the dark, hallowed caves of *Le Pin* and *Pavie*. Rich and genteel as a Maugham novel, its full-bodied character commands top-dollar at auction. In blending, it's the yin to Cabernet's yang.

In California, Merlot and merlot are as disparate in quality and quantity as *Temperley* of London, and, say, *Temperley* for Target. With the mass-market version, you get a fleeting taste of what the grape can do, but it falls apart after a season or two.

It's that little *m*, however, that fueled Miles' consternation. And the rise of that highly marketable, low-brow wine began more than a decade before the film's release. When renewed interest in "French Paradox" studies touted the beneficial effects of a nightly nip in the early 1990s, Robert Parker's mother asked her wine critic son what she ought to be drinking. Merlot was his answer. From there, as Swanson Vineyards winemaker Chris Phelps recalls, merlot simply "took off." California's idyllic climate meant it could be grown in backyards and blocks alike—and it was. Grapes were overgrown and overproduced, then fashioned as a counterpart to cheap chardonnay. "You could walk into any bar, order a red wine," Phelps remembers, "and a rather unremarkable glass of 'merlot' would appear."

A few harvests have passed since the summer of *Sideways*. Mediocre merlot was ultimately replaced



Jeff Gargiulo purchased his first boutique vineyard in Napa Valley's Oakville in 1992.

on shelves at Trader Joe's with lackluster Pinot. Like many an overnight success story, the easy-to-grow grape—reminiscent of catch-all Chablis—fell prey to its own popularity.

Unfazed in their guilt by name association, select Napa Valley vintners quietly continued the pursuit of serious California wine. Now, whether by boutique producers or from old-guard vineyards, it has never been a better time to order a "bleeping" Merlot.

In searching for truly big M Merlot, great wine begins with "in-house" vintners tending to their own grapes with the time, dollars and dedication it takes to produce single-varietal wine. Take Duckhorn, whose Merlot was first harvested 31 years ago in Napa Valley. The winery built its reputation on lush wines with the strength and unexpected austerity to stand up to its

"MERLOT IS NOT A WINE FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED. AND IT'S NOT A LADDER TO CABERNET, EITHER." —CHRIS PHELPS, SWANSON VINEYARDS

lofty Cab neighbors—all matched with ageing potential (five to seven years) and the fruit-driven hallmark of the grape.

"Dan and Margaret [Duckhorn] went to Pomerol and were so enamored of the wines, so soft and velvety, and wondered why they couldn't do that here," explains Duckhorn winemaker Bill Nancarrow. "Back in 1978 with the Three Palms, no one had seen or bottled a straight Napa Merlot. It was a powerful wine."

Along with Duckhorn, Swanson Vineyards and Paloma entered as power-players in Cab Country with their own monumental Merlots. So, too, Merlot-making efforts from some of Cabernet's all-stars: Pahlmeyer and Nickel & Nickel; Stags Leap stalwarts Clos du Val and Shafer; and Silver Oak Twomey.

Most recently, a new crop of boutique producers is looking for Pomerol in all the right places. Five years ago, Bay Area boulevardier Michael Polensko invested in a plum Oak Knoll vineyard. He cherrypicked the Tiger Woods of Napa Valley—winemaker Sarah Gott—and set out to handcraft exceptional right-bank wine from pristine California fruit. With solid acidity, blackberry silkiness and a persistent finish, the premiere vintage of Blackbird Vineyards coincided with Pinot Noir's media moment. Despite the poor timing, the 100 cases sold out immediately. Three years later, Blackbird's latest vintage (1,120 cases) was featured at L.A.'s annual Bogart Wine Aficionado Dinner (in good company with the revered Château Clinet, Pomerol and Château Monbousquet, Saint-Émilion).

With pedigree of personae comes provenance of appellation. Just ask Jeff Gargiulo. His winery sits off Silverado Trail in Oakville Cross, where the former Sunkist CEO could borrow a cup of sugar from Screaming Eagle by screaming across his red-soil vineyards. Next month's release, from BV's former Money Road Ranch, has caught the attention of the wine world for the maturity of its century-old vineyard, rich color and deep mocha-berry flavor. (The only shortcoming? Just 1,162 cases. "I can't even buy a bottle of my wine," laughs the gregarious Gargiulo.)

There's the elite winemaker and the coveted block, but big M is most easily identified by its pricetag. Gargiulo may be a steal at \$40, but on the whole, good Merlot doesn't come cheap. Deep in Napa Valley resides the lone "cult" Merlot. Produced in Pétrusian 95/5 Merlot/Cabernet Franc style by John Schwartz and cult Cab doyenne Heidi Barrett (of Screaming Eagle fame), the preeminent Amuse-Bouche and its limited bottling commands a whopping \$1,350 for a six-bottle allocation—if a collector can get on the iron-clad list.

So, with all this exquisite Napa Merlot, what about a lingering Sideways effect? Clos du Val winemaker John Clews dispels any confusion: "In this category, price and style, we haven't seen any change at all. There are a few wineries in California that specialize

in Merlot, and that's their main varietal—a delicious grape." Seems Merlot drinkers continue to drink, well, Merlot. IRI and Nielsen both reported a 14-to-15% hike in luxury Merlot sales between 2005 and '06. In fact, most statistics since the movie's

release suggest a significant rise for ultra-premium labels.

The tongue-in-cheek sign of Merlot's return to the spotlight, however, circles back to the setting of Miles' tirade—Hartley-Ostini Hitching Post Tavern. After almost three decades away from the grape, owner Frank Ostini recently released three very special wines. "With the joke against Merlot, we were moved to bottle 100% Merlot once again." Perhaps it will go down as the "Sideways" vintage. (With a big M, of course.) ●