

# For the Love of Merlot

**Robert Whitley** on Sep 19, 2017

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October is merlot month. Once upon a time, the mere thought of a month dedicated to merlot would have inspired smirks all around. The hit movie "Sideways" poked fun at merlot drinkers, and for years afterward, merlot producers wrestled with the image of merlot as a mediocre wine.

That was never the case, of course. The most sought-after wine in the world, Chateau Petrus from the Pomerol district of Bordeaux, France, is a merlot. And merlot is the money grape throughout the Right Bank of Bordeaux, the most prominent wine-growing areas being Pomerol and Saint-Emilion. Merlot thrives in the cool clay soils of the Right Bank, whereas cabernet sauvignon struggles to ripen there most years.

Many of the wines produced there are legendary, such as the long-lived Chateau Cheval Blanc, Chateau Ausone, Chateau Angelus and Chateau Figeac. The finest fetch eye-popping prices.

But Bordeaux isn't the only wine-growing region that is kind to merlot. Italy's Tuscan region has embraced merlot, and it frequently pops up blended with sangiovese in Chianti, and with cabernet sauvignon and sangiovese in the so-called Super Tuscan red blends.

Washington can also claim merlot as an important grape variety, probably more so than cabernet sauvignon.

And California's finest merlot, most of which comes from the Napa Valley, can be compared favorably to the great wines of the Bordeaux Right Bank. Duckhorn Vineyards built a vast empire around merlot. Its Napa Valley neighbor Beringer Vineyards has long made a sensational merlot from the Bancroft Ranch on Howell Mountain.

Chappellet, while renowned for its cabernet sauvignon, has a 30-year track record of outstanding merlot. More recently, Nickel & Nickel has produced stunning merlot from its Harris Vineyard.

These are some of the world's greatest red wines. So go ahead and celebrate merlot month. There is no shame in enjoying a nice glass.

## Best Value

Wines are rated on a 100-point scale. Wines are chosen for review because they represent outstanding quality or value, and the scores are simply a measure of this reviewer's enthusiasm for the recommended wine.

Bridlewood Estate Winery 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles (\$15) -- If you're on a budget but you don't want to settle for mediocre, this vintage of Bridlewood cabernet sauvignon is just what the doctor ordered. It's fleshy, juicy and complex, showing red and dark fruits, wood spice and supple tannins. It's perfect for that tailgate party with tri-tip and barbecued baby back ribs! Rating: 90

Donnafugata 2015 Sedara, Sicily, Italy (\$16) -- Even at the entry level, Donnafugata simply doesn't make bad wine. The 2015 sedara blend (mostly composed of nero d'avola) is a fruity, delicious companion to pasta dishes, smoky barbecued meats or with savory cheeses. It shows juicy blue fruits with a subtle whiff of black pepper. And the price is right. Rating: 87.

#### Tasting Notes

Gloria Ferrer 2010 Anniversary Cuvee, Carneros (\$40) -- Gloria Ferrer's sparkling wines have been on a decade-long roll, so hardly anything it does surprises. The latest and greatest from the team is the 2010 Anniversary Cuvee that was aged for more than five years prior to disgorgement and is priced remarkably low (for this genre of bubbly) at \$40. So, what's in the bottle? It's a blend of pinot noir and chardonnay, top-heavy on the pinot, and it's a major triumph: fresh and inviting, yet toasty and mysterious, with complex layers that show notes of pear and spice. With exceptional depth and impressive length, this is immediately one of California's most formidable sparkling wines, a worthy alternative to more expensive vintage Champagne. Rating: 96.

Penner-Ash 2015 Old-Vine Riesling, Hyland Vineyard, McMinnville, Oregon (\$35) -- The cult of minerality is on full display with this beautifully crafted old-vine riesling from Oregon. On the nose, it shows a breathtaking wet-stone minerality that is rare in domestic riesling. On the palate, the wine is bone-dry and exhibits complex aromas of tropical fruit, dried apricot and spice. The finish lingers impressively. It's gorgeous now but most certainly a wine that will reach new heights with significant age. Rating: 95.

Clos du Val 2015 Pinot Noir, Gran Val Vineyard, Carneros (\$60) -- This stunner from Clos du Val is dazzling on the nose and delicious on the palate, exhibiting intense red cherry aromas complemented by a touch of wood spice. Tannins are supple and sweet. The exquisite balance of this wine suggests it will age nicely, although I would hardly frown upon immediate consumption. Rating: 94.

Donnafugata 2016 Grillo 'SurSur,' Sicilia DOC, Italy (\$20) -- Donnafugata excels with white wines, perhaps because it is situated on the cooler side of the island. The SurSur grillo is remarkably fresh and zesty, with simple but delicious yellow-fruit aromas and an intriguing savory note on the finish. It's an excellent match for grilled or roasted fish, or savory Mediterranean tapas. Rating: 90.

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