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Where Did All The Merlot Go?

Misunderstood, maligned, lately a unicorn on wine store shelves, the great Bordeaux grape is ripe for rediscovery. Lettie Teague tracks it down.

THE SIGNS were subtle but unmistakable. An online search on a retail wine site turned up nothing. In one wine store, the few bottles I found were shelved near the floor. In another, the wines were stacked under a sign that read “Cabernet.” Where did all the Merlot go?

Some drinkers date the fall of Merlot to the 2004 movie “Sideways,” whose main character cursed it (and praised Pinot Noir). Others—more plausibly—blame its demise on poor wine-making or viticultural decisions by producers several decades ago. Planted in the wrong place and/or cheaply made, the oceans

of Merlot that resulted failed to thrill. But Merlot never fully disappeared. And thanks to both longtime supporters and new natural-wine fans, it may even be poised for a comeback.

One of the great ironies of all the oenological ire Merlot inspired: Some of the greatest, most sought-after wines in the world are made from this grape, legendary wines that collectors covet and few can afford. I’m talking about Château Petrus, the great and pricey Pomerol—a bottle of which from the 2018 vintage can cost \$18,000—and Masseto, the all-Merlot Super-Tuscan whose 2018 iteration sells for around \$900 if you can find it. They’re the rich, supple, lush, captivating Merlots most Merlot haters have likely never tasted.

But this grape’s greatness isn’t

just as a solo act: Merlot shines as a member of the chorus as well. Great wines are made by blending Merlot with other grapes. Merlot fills in the “mid-palate” of Cabernet, winemakers have told me, providing the lushness and softer tannins Cabernet lacks. Merlot’s most common blending counterparts are Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc; others include Sangiovese, Malbec and Petit Verdot.

Although single-varietal wines and blends are made with Merlot all over the world, this grape shines particularly bright in the California regions Napa and Sonoma, Washington state, Long Island, various parts of Italy (particularly Tuscany) and, famously, the Right Bank of Bordeaux, France, in Saint-Émilion

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EATING & DRINKING

In Search of Merlot, In Bordeaux and Beyond

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The wines that made drinkers stop drinking Merlot weren't often produced in these places. It's important to note that those drinkers never stopped at all when it came to Bordeaux, perhaps because they didn't even know the wines were made of Merlot. As Sarah Wright, sales assistant at the Saint-Émilion-based Château Milon opined, "The Anything-But-Merlot phenomenon was/is very much an Anglo-Saxon thing." The winery produces a delightful Merlot under the Château Milon Caprice label that its importer calls "Merlojolais" for its juicy, friendly nature. At \$20 a bottle for the 2019 vintage, this wine is also very accessibly priced.

The wines that made drinkers turn away from Merlot were more likely made in lesser regions of Chile, Australia or California's Central Coast. In the case of Chile, many wines labeled Merlot turned out to be a different grape altogether. According to analysis by French ampelographer Jean-Michel Boursiquot in 1994, some of the unattractively vegetal wines labeled Chilean Merlot were actually Carménère, a grape imported from France that bears some resemblance to Merlot.

Alex Ryan, president, CEO and chairman of the Duckhorn Portfolio, had a contrarian's take on Merlot's popularity plummet. " 'Sideways' was the best thing that happened to Merlot," he said in a phone call. "We took it as a shot across the bow and stepped up our efforts." Duckhorn Vineyards, one of 10 wineries in the Duckhorn Portfolio, is the rare Napa winery better known for its Merlot than its Cabernet.

Duckhorn sold even more Merlot when lesser examples left the market. There are many Merlots in the Duckhorn Portfolio, including the Duckhorn Vineyards Napa Valley Merlot (\$45); the Duckhorn Vineyards Three Palms Vineyard Merlot (\$100); the 2021 Decoy Limited Alexander Valley Merlot (\$30); and the basic Decoy California Merlot (\$18), made in much larger quantities. The last was, until recently, from Sonoma, but the lush, accessibly styled bottle of 2019 Decoy I

“Sideways” was the best thing that happened to Merlot. We took it as a shot across the bow and stepped up our efforts?

bought bore a “California” appellation. Why the change? Mr. Ryan explained that they'd found better fruit from vineyards in various parts of California, including Sonoma and Napa, which led to the generic appellation.

Mr. Ryan is currently looking to buy more Merlot vineyards, but they aren't easy to find. According to the Napa County Agricultural Crop Report, in 2021 just 4,019 acres were planted to Merlot versus 24,094 planted to Cabernet. In neighboring Sonoma County in 2021, 4,140 acres were planted to Merlot, down from 5,216 in 2011. In both Napa and Sonoma, Cabernet is simply a much more profitable grape to grow.

On Long Island and in Washington state, Merlot remains a popular grape, its price fairly stable. Merlot is the most-planted red grape on Long Island and a staple of the region. French-born winemaker Gilles Martin has been making Merlot on Long Island since 1997 and noted the region is well-suited to the variety. "Grown the right way it's a very rich wine with a lot of aromatics," he said. Mr. Martin makes Merlot for four Long Island wineries as well as a Merlot-Chardonnay sparkling wine for Sparkling Pointe winery.

Longtime Washington state winemaker Mike Januik, aka "Mr. Merlot," has no trouble selling his wines, including the polished 2019 Januik Columbia Valley Merlot (\$30). He regards Merlot as one of Washington state's great success stories. Mr. Januik, too, is pursuing additional Merlot grapes, particularly in the Horse Heaven Hills region. Merlot from that area is much sought-after and priced just the same as Red Mountain Cabernet, he said.

The grape has found more-recent converts among natural winemakers. James Jelks of Santa Cruz-based Floréz Wines told me that to him and others in the natural-wine community, Merlot's "maligned reputation" makes it all the more compelling, a challenge worth tackling. "People aren't afraid of it," he said.



Though there were other reasons for Merlot's downward trend, many laid blame with the 2004 movie 'Sideways.'



His own conversion, back in 2021, was a bit of an accident: It was a grape he could afford as a "young winemaker with no clout," said Mr. Jelks, now 32. Opportunity came in the form of Merlot from a dry-farmed cool-climate vineyard in Santa Cruz "at the cusp of ripeness."

The 2021 Floréz Picard Hunter Hill Vineyard Merlot (\$37), made from non-certified organic grapes with no added sulphites, is a crisp, red-berry-fruited, natural wine with bright acidity—a different and delightful take on California Merlot.

I discovered the Floréz Merlot and another natural Merlot, the more structured 2020 Camomille

Argiles Rouges (\$16), a Vin de France (French table wine) produced by Château de Cranne in Bordeaux, at Astor Wines & Spirits in Manhattan. Astor's head wine buyer Lorena Ascencios told me she has been on the hunt for Merlot. She's a fan of the grape; maybe it takes a fan to stick to a search that hasn't always been easy. "I want the good stuff," she said, and she has found some.

After the drubbing Merlot received in the movie "Sideways," I was interested to learn that Blackstone Publishing is scheduled to publish a hardcover reissue of the book on which it's based in March,

followed by the sequel "Sideways: Chile." When I reached the books' author, Rex Pickett, in Sonoma, Calif., he insisted that when the character Miles curses Merlot, he isn't really hating the grape; he's balking at the pressure he's getting to go along with his soon-to-be-married friend's infidelity. "I never hated Merlot," Mr. Pickett declared.

So the so-called "Sideways Effect" alleged to have torpedoed Merlot's reputation was based on a misunderstanding. Perhaps people will read more closely this time around. And with very good Merlots made all over the world, it's never too late to set the record straight.

KEY MERLOT REGIONS

Merlot is grown all over the world, but some places make more wines—and more memorable ones—than others.

Bordeaux The Merlot grape originated in Bordeaux and it remains important in the region. Primarily a blending grape on the Left Bank of Bordeaux, it's also vinified alone at certain properties on the Right Bank, in Saint-Émilion and (especially) Pomerol. The best wines are the quintessence of Merlot greatness: lush with great concentration and depth, but more accessible than Cabernet-dominant peers from the Left Bank.

California Merlot's numbers have dwindled and it's dwarfed by Cabernet, but there is still much Merlot made in California—notably in Napa and Sonoma, but in a few other places too, sometimes memorably. Merlot is particularly popular in Bordeaux-style red blends now, though with increased scarcity of the grape, the blends may contain a lower percentage of Merlot and a higher percentage of grapes like Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc.

Washington The Merlots of Washington state can be just as structured as the state's Cabernets. A Washington winemaker once told me he used Cabernet to "soften" his Merlots. Generally a bit more restrained and higher in acidity than their California counterparts, Washington Merlots are notable for their balance and notes of red and dark fruit. Walla Walla, Red Mountain and Horse Heaven Hills are top regions.

Long Island With a maritime climate often compared to Bordeaux's, the North Fork is a natural home to the Bordelais grape, Merlot. It's the most-planted red grape in the region, and though ripeness (or its lack) was a challenge early on, more diverse Merlot clones and warmer growing seasons have been a boon.

Honorable Mentions Merlot is grown widely globally and in certain places to great effect, though it shows up most often in a Bordeaux-style blend rather than as a solo act. In Italy, some terrific Merlot blends come out of Tuscany (the Bolgheri in particular), and there is Merlot in Friuli and neighboring Slovenia too. Chile, Israel and Australia all produce some credible examples, as do other countries and regions too numerous to mention.

AVANG CEMPAKA (MAP); F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (WINE); EVERETT COLLECTION (SIDEWAYS)

10 Merlots To Discover

1 | 2020 Camomille Merlot Argiles Rouges Vin de France \$16 This organic Merlot with no added sulphites is produced by Château de Cranne in Donzac, Bordeaux. It's a fresh but surprisingly structured red with aromas of red and dark fruit.

2 | 2021 Channing Daughters Rosato di Merlot North Fork Long Island \$23 Winemaker James Christopher Tracy makes six different Merlots and Merlot blends, including this delightful rosato. It's made entirely from Merlot grapes grown specifically to produce pink, not red wine.

3 | 2019 Château Milon Caprice Saint-Émilion \$20 Alexia and Pierre Bouyer oversee a property with vines in the Saint-Émilion and Pomerol appellations. This is a marvelously aromatic Merlot produced from parcels with an average vine age of 35 years. Initially a bit tannic, it opens beautifully upon decanting.

4 | 2019 Decoy California Merlot \$18 Duck-

horn is synonymous with Merlot, and the Decoy brand is the winery's largest-production rendition. It's made in a round, crowd-pleasing, fruit-forward (but not at all jammy) style.

5 | 2021 Floréz Picard Hunter Hill Vineyard Merlot \$37 Winemaker James Jelks produced a singular California Merlot from a singular cool-climate, old(ish)-vine Santa Cruz County vineyard. Made with no added sulphites, it's a crisp, bright-berried, deliciously drinkable wine with alluring aromas of red and dark fruit.

6 | 2018 Grgich Hills Estate Napa Valley Merlot \$47 This famed Napa Valley winery only produces a third as much Merlot as it does Cabernet, but this densely fruited red clearly receives just as much care and attention. The fruit is sourced from several certified-organic Napa vineyards.

7 | 2019 Januik Columbia Valley Merlot \$30 Washington winemaker Mike Januik is known as Mr. Merlot for a reason. This polished, beautifully textured red sourced from top Co-

lumbia Valley vineyards, displays his expertise.

8 | 2014 McCall Reserve Corchaug Estate Merlot \$31 Russ McCall planted Merlot almost 25 years ago and produced his first Merlot in 2007. He waits to release his wines, too; this 2014 is the current vintage. Made by Frenchman Gilles Martin, it's a rich, structured red with notes of spice and red fruit.

9 | 2019 Pride Mountain Vineyards Merlot Napa County Sonoma County \$75 Made from 70% Napa, 30% Sonoma fruit, this is a beautiful mountaintop Merlot marked by vivid red- and dark-fruit aromas. Full-bodied and lush, beautifully balanced with fine-grained tannins, it's pricey and it drinks like it, too.

10 | 2019 Vinum Terra Rouge Bordeaux \$16 Nicolas Boissonneau produces this attractive, easy drinking Merlot from his family's organic and biodynamic estate vineyard in Entre-Deux-Mers, Bordeaux, with no added sulfites. "I think they are less 'anti-Merlot' in France," he said.

