

IS MERLOT READY TO MAKE A COMEBACK?

by Rich Mauro

Ever since "Sideways" trash-talked Merlot almost two years ago, what had been the red wine phenomenon of the 1990s suddenly experienced a bottoming of popularity and an associated stagnation in sales.

During the 1990s, Merlot, especially California Merlot, had experienced phenomenal growth in sales. Sales of California Merlot (which accounts for most of what we see in our stores and restaurants) increased from 800,000 cases in 1990 to 13.1 million in 1999, (according to The Wine Institute and the *Impact Annual Wine Study*). And the growth continued into this century, with double-digit sales growth in each of the first five years.

Along with this growth, though, came a backlash against Merlot. It became fashionable among "serious" wine drinkers to disparage Merlot as a simple, easygoing drink for beginners.

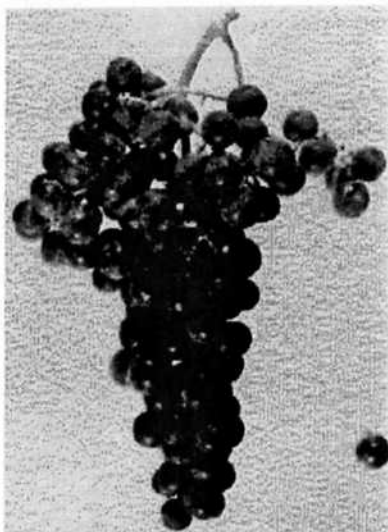
Truthfully, much of the Merlot on the market over that time was lackluster and uninteresting. Mostly, this was the result of attempts to capitalize on consumer interest with mass plantings in poorly suited sites and industrial production.

Then came "Sideways." And the winning streak seemed to come to an end. People came away from the movie with the impression that Merlot is only good as a blending grape.

Over the year or so since the movie, reports came from all over the wine industry of a decline in interest in Merlot. It seemed like very trade publication in the business ran an article on the phenomenon. Overall sales of Merlot stayed about the same in the last year and sales of higher priced Merlot actually declined.

Still, it now appears consumers have remained enthusiastic about Merlot, particularly for wines under \$20, after all (according to the "Wine Opinions" Survey). Ironically, the survey concluded that stagnation in Merlot sales might have had at least as much to do with the trade's sales and marketing practices as with actual change in consumer preference.

Of course, quality Merlot always has been available from responsible producers who focused on the best sites to plant the grape, as well as careful growing and respectful winemaking techniques. Don't forget, Merlot is the dominant grape in



the Bordeaux wines from Pomerol and (along with Cabernet Franc) St. Émilion, where it is responsible for countless great (not to mention extremely expensive) wines. Can anyone say "Château Petrus?" A few more affordable wines were included in my tastings and they fared quite well.

In the U.S., Washington State built much of its skyrocketing reputation in the 1990s on Merlot. Four out of four wines tasted for this report made the cut, including a 1999 Seven Hills Columbia Valley Klipsun Vineyard, which was included as a ringer. The Leonetti was the top wine of the tasting and the Seven Hills ranked in the top five.

As for California, the message about appropriate site, growing and winemaking decisions come through in spades. Of the wines I tasted for this report (with a couple of exceptions), all came from the premium winegrowing regions of Napa and Sonoma.

Below are listed the wines recommended from recent tastings I have conducted:

Just right for everyday drinking (under \$20):

Expect smooth texture, medium body and forward fruit. The Bonterra, in particular, stood out — pure cherry and currant, with depth and smooth tannins — and one of the stars of the tasting at any price.

- 2003 Covey Run Columbia Valley
- 2003 Sterling Vintner's Collection
- 2002 Bonterra Mendocino County

Organic

- 2002 B & G St. Émilion
- 2003 Christian Moueix Bordeaux Merlot
- 2003 J.P. Moueix St. Émilion
- 2001 Grand Archer Sonoma County
- 2002 Sebastiani Sonoma County
- 2002 Napa Cellars Napa Valley

A lot of wine for a little more money (\$20-\$30):

More money should buy more fruit and character. That's exactly what you get from all these wines but especially the full-bodied Kenwood, from a winery better known for its Cabernet, and the Dashe, from a winery better known for its Zinfandel.

- 2002 Canoe Ridge Columbia Valley Estate Grown
- 2003 Sterling Napa Valley
- 2003 Clos du Val Napa Valley
- 2002 Kenwood Sonoma Valley Reserve
- 2003 Kendall-Jackson Sonoma/ Napa Grand Reserve
- 2002 Dashe Potter Valley Iron Oak Vineyard

Higher prices and expectations (over \$30):

When done right, Merlot yields a rich wine with opulent fruit, layers of complexity, good structure, and a luscious texture. While earlier maturing than, say Cabernet Sauvignon, some can age 10+ years. Although this comes at a premium, wines like the Leonetti and Mayacamas successfully combine these qualities into a balanced whole. It also was good to see the wines from the Three Palms Vineyard do well, as this is one of the most celebrated Merlot vineyards in the world.

- 2002 Provenance Napa Valley Oak Knoll and Carneros
- 2001 Mayacamas Napa Valley
- 2002 Grgich Hills Napa Valley Estate Grown
- 2001 Arrowood Sonoma County Unfiltered & Unfiltered
- 2001 Chateau la Grave a Pomerol
- 2002 Sterling Three Palms Vineyard
- 2002 HdV Carneros Napa Valley Red Wine
- 2004 Leonetti Columbia Valley
- 2002 Duckhorn Three Palms Vineyard