

smoothly away toward the sensual horizon. Wilfred Wong said, "A gem among the baubles!"

Shafer

1991 One of the tasters actually said "Huggable!" Indeed, a certain romantic appeal in the luscious, ripe, exuberant fruit seems to inspire a kind of affection. No wonder it's such a favorite in restaurants. \$19.50

Silverado Vineyards

1991 This wine shows why the valley's merlot producers were heartbroken when Silverado took these grapes—from the old Harry See vineyard—off the open market. Rich but not ponderous, exquisitely balanced, as seamless as the Chappellet but with deep, almost chocolate richness. \$17

Sterling Vineyards

1990 Three Palms Vineyard

A commanding nose—true complexity, even mystery. Lots of wood and tannin, but plenty of juicy, concentrated fruit, too, in excellent balance. A wine to respect now and enjoy in a couple of years. \$18

Sterling Vineyards

1991 Robert Finigan said, "One of the most profound, complex noses." Not the bright, fresh-fruit California nose the tasters were accustomed to, which made it that much more interesting. Nice weight and balance, lovely texture, an a remarkable burnished glow to the finish. \$14

Recommended Napa Valley Merlots

In addition to the outstanding examples above, these wines show undeniable quality, notwithstanding individual preferences.

Cafaro Cellars 1990

Clos Pegase 1991

Clos Robert 1992

Conn Creek 1990

Cosentino 1991

Cuvaison 1991

Duckhorn 1991 Three Palms Vineyard

Freemark Abbey 1991

Jaeger 1989 Inglewood Vineyard

Markham 1991

Joseph Phelps 1991

Pine Ridge 1991

Rubisow-Sargent 1989 Mt. Veeder

Rutherford Hill 1991

St. Clement 1991

Robert Sinskey 1990 Los Carneros

Steltzner 1991 Stag's Leap District EB

St. Supery 1991 EB

Swanson 1991 EB

Truchard 1991 Carneros

Whitehall Lane 1991 Knights Valley ■

UNLIKELY CELLARMATES

HOGUE CELLARS RESERVE MERLOT

by Richard Paul Hinkle

Merlot's popularity extends far beyond the Napa Valley. The vineyards of eastern Washington's Columbia and Yakima Valleys have also proven themselves to be well-acclimated to growing the variety. Wine & Spirits asked Richard Hinkle to assess the ageability of Hogue Cellars' Merlot, one of the leading producers of the region. —Ed.

Washington State's Yakima Valley was once home to an inexhaustible array of crops. Today, it's hops, apples, and wine grapes. Among the wine grapes, merlot has taken top billing for producing wines accessible when bottled, agreeable when aged.

While Hogue Farms still grows specialty apples and the finest hops a brewer could bargain for, in little more than a decade, Hogue Cellars has grown to more than a quarter million cases a year of premium wines. Head of Hogue's class? A merlot that enters the bottle balanced and silky, and rewards patient cellaring with firm flavors and long texture.

"The key to merlots that will age," argues winemaker David Forsyth, "is not handling the wine too much before bottling. We try to maintain a protective regimen: no extended maceration, keep the barrels topped, limited racking, and no fining at all if we can get away with it. Oxygen attacks fruit flavors, and that's one of merlot's greatest attractions. And too much handling can boost astringency; if you go into the bottle with high astringency, well, you're sure to lose ageability."

Hogue's general manager and viticulturalist is the veteran Wade Wolfe, who previously guided vineyard development and management at Chateau Ste. Michelle. "Good vineyard selection is equally important to avoiding astringency," adds Wolfe. "A more exposed site, with all the wind we get up here, will give you fruit with high astringency. It's also important to handle the fruit gently at harvest and in transport."

Forsyth says that gentle handling extends to the fermentation, where pumping over is done softly with a sprinkler (to reduce phenol/tannin extraction) rather than with "an irrigation device!" Fining is severely limited. "If we have an astringent lot, we'll fine it as little as is necessary, usually with gelatin, occasionally with egg whites. If we fine, we want to fine within the first six months. After that, fining strips out too much color, too much flavor; you take out those flavor components that contribute so much to the mouth feel. In most years, we do no fining whatsoever."

He's also convinced that what he adds to complexity by drawing fruit from diverse vineyards also adds to the wine's ageability. "We get fruit from eleven or twelve different vineyards, some here in Prosser where it's generally cool, and some from the Tri-Cities area which is a bit warmer. Prosser fruit is brighter, with the raspberry component, with more acidity, more structure. Tri-Cities fruit is riper, more supple. They go together nicely."

1983 Bell pepper, anise and iodine blend in the bouquet. The wine is quite round in texture, full with glycerin and a slight dustiness of age. "One of my favorites," says Wolfe. "It's a bit on the ripe side, with prune and plum fruit and some of that Port-like quality."

1984 Anise and graham-like oak scents evidence some age. Quite silky, but the wine hasn't lost the power of its fruit. "I like the violets, blueberry, cedar and vanilla," notes Forsyth. "It has an earthy quality, almost soy-like. We had a harsh winter, and the crop load was very light."

1985 Tangy, bright and crisp, with cassia and mint flavors. Good natural acid levels throughout keep the fruit at a bouncy, lively level. Add the supple mouth feel that improves as merlot ages, and you can see why the variety is so seductive. "I really see this vintage as at its peak, and would suggest not holding it very much longer," says Wolfe. "Yes, it's smooth; it has that molasses feel to it," adds Forsyth. "It's ready."

1986 Floral aromas, like the dried flowers in potpourri, with anise flavors and an herbaceous edge. "A little ripe, like the '85, but not quite so developed," says Wolfe. "It has good body, with jammy plum and cedar, and a bit of bitterness in the finish that closes things off in the mouth."

1987 Anise, herbal and tar aromas are framed by a touch of oak. Bold in the mouth, but balanced. On the whole: simply scintillating. "This has great aging potential," says Forsyth. "It had great blackberry fruit even going into the bottle, and it's better now." Wolfe likes it for "the balance between the ripe chocolate/plum side and the cherry/berry and violet side." There's great complexity as well, with different layers showing off different aspects of fruit.

1988 Obvious oak provides a scent like smoked bacon; there're also anise, violets and cedar aromas. Very bright and well-defined fruit development. "There's a lot of that dill, American-oak spice," notes Forsyth. "American oak seems to match up better to merlot's herbaceousness than French oak, at least for us."

1989 Jammy scents of ripe currant and iodine; angular and edgy in the mouth. "There's a little volatile acidity, but it has a great mouth feel, and I like the leathery component," says Forsyth. "This was a very cool growing season," Wolfe explains. "The volatile acidity adds a nice note to the aroma."

1990 Closed and tight, with lean black currant and blueberry fruit that will come forward with time. "It's young," says Wolfe. "It was a moderate growing season, with a smaller crop, so this should be balanced enough to age very nicely."