

THE WORLD'S BEST MERLOTS

Despite the rising tide of mediocre Merlot currently flooding today's market, classic Merlot remains an option for lovers of elegant, complex and distinguished red wine. Merlot grapes—like grapes everywhere—are affected by the soil and climate of their vineyards. Consequently, even classic Merlot wine styles will vary from region to region.

France's temperate climate tends to yield a more tightly wound version whose multilayered flavors may unfold slowly with time. However, even California's cooler regions are generally warmer than those of France, and riper California Merlot grapes can yield more up-front wine flavors and aromas at an early stage.

Merlot is the most widely planted grape in Bordeaux, and it is an important part of the blend for such renowned Médoc chateaus as Lafite Rothschild, Latour and Mouton-Rothschild. But like most of their neighbors on the west bank of the Gironde, these estates rely on Cabernet Sauvignon as their premier grape. Merlot brings additional character to the blend nonetheless, adding complexity, texture and breadth.

The grape finds its zenith on the eastern bank of the Dordogne River, however, in the nearby Bordeaux appellations of Pomerol and St.-Emilion, where it is easily the most dominant variety. Château Pétrus, perhaps the world's most famous Merlot, is made in Pomerol—often from 100 percent Merlot. Only in hot, ripe years is a little Cabernet Franc added to the blend. Another quintessential all-Merlot Pomerol is Château Le Pin, arguably the most sought-after wine in all Bordeaux. Other great Pomerols include such names as Certan de May, Clinet, La Conseillante, L'Eglise Clinet, L'Evangile, La Fleur-Pétrus, Lafleur, Trochanoy and Vieux-Château-Certan.

In good vintages, Pétrus not only serves up intense blackberry, cassis, anise and spice flavors, but it also demonstrates great staying power. At a tasting in California last February led by Christian Moueix, whose family partially owns Pétrus, the 1975 and 1971 vintages showed beautifully.

And yet Moueix was quick to note that not every year is a keeper. The vintner described 1993 as "an average vintage" and suggested that collectors drink it now rather than hold onto it.

Adjacent to Pomerol is Bordeaux's other premier Merlot appellation, St.-Emilion, where such renowned wines as



These Merlot vines in Pomerol embody the best the grape has to offer.

MICK ROCK/CEPHAS

70 percent of the region is planted to Merlot, Cabernet Franc nonetheless plays a more important role here than in Pomerol. At Cheval-Blanc, it typically makes up 70 percent of the blend, and at Ausone, it can be used in equal proportion to Merlot.

Blending percentages vary widely throughout the area; Château Magdelaine, for example, uses 100 percent Merlot,

which is often considered to be a primary aromatic and flavor component; Cabernet Franc, on the other hand, offers structure and finesse. Other well-known wines from the region include châteaux Angélys, Canon-La Gaffelière, Figeac, Monbousquet, Pavie-Decesse and Troplong-Mondot.

Blending is also common among New World Merlots. In the United States, a varietally designated wine may contain up to 25 percent of other varietals in addition to the one listed on the label. Depending on each year's harvest results, a wine-

maker may add Cabernet Sauvignon—or any other grape, for that matter—to add balance, interest or simply volume to the final Merlot blend.

Perhaps the best-known Merlot in California is made by Matanzas Creek. Located in a cool corner of Sonoma Valley, this winery planted its first Merlot vines in 1974 with a prescient strategy that would take advantage of both its unusually cool growing site and a wide-open market niche begging to be filled. After a rocky first decade, the winery hit its stride with a Merlot that has since become a benchmark for California. Other fine producers from the state include Arrowood, Beringer, Chateau St. Jean, Duckhorn, Havens, Paradigm, Pine Ridge, St. Francis, Silverado Vineyards, Truchard and rising star Lewis Cellars.

North of California, Washington state has invested heavily in Merlot, its most widely planted red grape. And even though Washington's Merlot may tend to lag behind its Cabernet in quality, the state still produces some excellent Merlot wines. Look for names such as Chateau Ste. Michelle, Columbia Crest, L'Ecole No. 41, Leonetti and Woodward Canyon.

To the east, New Yorkers should note that they don't have to travel across the country to find a memorable American Merlot. Long Island wineries such as Bedell, Lenz, Palmer, Paumanok and Pellegrini Vineyards lead the pack among a group of vintners who continue to improve and expand production.

As with all wines, the best are often the hardest to find. Yet despite the marketing hype and the massive amount of forgettable Merlot consumed today, it is heartening to recall the classic Merlots. These are the wines that continue to set the standard for all others, regardless of price. After all, when the bottom line is flavor, nothing else really counts.

