

# 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, Trotanoy 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 Angélu, 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 varieties 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.

# Top-Scoring Merlots & Blends From Around the World

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	SCORE	WINE	PRICE
<b>POMEROL</b>					
98	CHÂTEAU PÉTRUS Pomerol 1995	\$900	91	NEYERS Merlot Napa Valley 1995	\$25
97	CHÂTEAU TROTANOY Pomerol 1995	\$160	91	NEYERS Merlot Napa Valley Neyers Ranch-Conn Valley 1995	\$35
96	CHÂTEAU CERTAN DE MAY Pomerol 1995	\$100	91	PARADIGM Merlot Oakville 1995	\$32
96	CHÂTEAU L'ÉGLISE CLINET Pomerol 1995	\$275	91	JOSEPH PHELPS Merlot Napa Valley 1995	\$27
95	CHÂTEAU CLINET Pomerol 1995	\$225	91	SEAVEY Merlot Napa Valley 1994	\$24
94	CHÂTEAU LA CONSEILLANTE Pomerol 1995	\$100	91	TRUCHARD Merlot Napa Valley Carneros 1995	\$24
94	CHÂTEAU L'ÉVANGILE Pomerol 1995	\$125	<b>WASHINGTON</b>		
93	CHÂTEAU LE PIN Pomerol 1995	\$500	91	CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Merlot Columbia Valley Cold Creek Vineyard 1994	\$50
<b>ST.-EMILION</b>					
93	CHÂTEAU LA GOMERIE St.-Emilion 1995	\$NA	91	LEONETTI Merlot Columbia Valley 1995	\$40
93	CHÂTEAU LARMANDE St.-Emilion 1995	\$30	90	WALLA WALLA VINTNERS Merlot Washington 1995	\$18
93	CHÂTEAU PAVIE-MACQUIN St.-Emilion 1995	\$35	<b>OTHER REGIONS</b>		
93	CHÂTEAU DE VALANDRAUD St.-Emilion 1995	\$300	90	CASA LAPOSTOLLE <i>Chile</i> Merlot Rapel Valley Cuvée Alexandre 1995	\$15
<b>ITALY</b>					
96	CASTELLO DI AMA <i>Tuscany</i> Vigna l'Apparita 1993	\$100	89	CONCHA Y TORO <i>Chile</i> Merlot Rapel Valley Peumo Vineyard Marqués de Casa Concha 1994	\$13
92	TENUTA DELL'ORNELLAIA <i>Tuscany</i> Masseto 1994	\$143	89	ERRAZURIZ <i>Chile</i> Merlot Aconcagua Valley Reserva 1996	\$19
89	CASTELLO BANFI <i>Tuscany</i> Mandrielle 1994	\$29	89	MONTES <i>Chile</i> Merlot Curicó Valley Montes Alpha 1995	\$15
89	CASÒN HIRSCHPRUNN <i>Northeast</i> Casòn 1994	\$30	89	SCHNEIDER <i>New York</i> Merlot North Fork of Long Island 1994	\$19
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>					
92	DUCKHORN Merlot Napa Valley Estate Grown 1995	\$50	89	THELEMA <i>South Africa</i> Merlot Stellenbosch 1994	\$24
92	WHITEHALL LANE Merlot Napa Valley 1995	\$20	88	PAUMANOK <i>New York</i> Merlot North Fork of Long Island Grand Vintage 1995	\$19
91	LEWIS CELLARS Merlot Napa Valley Reserve 1995	\$45			