



California Merlot Shines

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California Merlot is not on the tip of every wine lover's tongue these days, but its popularity remains remarkably strong. It outsells every California wine except Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Consumers still love the grape despite it garnering only middling respect from the wine industry itself.

There's certainly a lot to like about the 2013 vintage, which now dominates store shelves alongside the remaining 2012s. Since my last report ("California Merlot Bounces Back," Nov. 30, 2015), I have tasted more than 130 wines, largely from 2013. I give that vintage a score of 90 points for Napa and 88 points for Sonoma on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale. That's just one tick below 2012 for each region. (For a chart of recommended wines, see page 30; a free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

California Merlot is popular for two reasons: American consumers like smooth-drinking reds, and they don't want to spend a lot of money. That's why most of the Merlot action happens in the \$10-to-\$25 range. Cheaper Merlots are innocuous at best, abysmal at worst, while top-rated Merlots are typically produced in small amounts and can come at prices upwards of \$75. That's Cabernet money!

You'll recognize many of the names among my top values this year. Winemaker Nick Goldschmidt is an active consultant around the world and has a number of homegrown labels in California. The Goldschmidt Merlot Alexander Valley Chelsea Goldschmidt 2014 (89, \$17) is zesty and fun to drink, with lively notes of black cherry, toasty vanilla and spiced herb. The wine, Goldschmidt explains, comes from a 35-year-old vineyard with well-drained loamy soil just east of Geyserville in Sonoma County. "2014 was a real cracker of a vintage that will drink well both young and old," he says. "The wines are really flavorful and have their youth really well. No issue with ripeness and no issue with structure. Just a wee beauty."

Other values to look for include Kendall-Jackson Merlot Sonoma County Vintner's Reserve 2013 (89, \$19), sleek and well-built, with black cherry and spicy toast flavors; St. Francis Claret Sonoma County 2013 (89, \$20), a round, supple blend with red currant and tomato leaf accents; and Alexander Valley Vineyards Merlot Alexander Valley 2014 (88, \$20), soft and easygoing, with ripe cherry and spice flavors.

Winemaker Aaron Pott leads the pack of top-rated California Merlots this year with his Pott La Carte et Le Territoire Young Inglewood Vineyard St. Helena 2013 (93, \$125), a big, gutsy, flamboyant Merlot, with aromas of currant and dark toasty spice and deep, layered flavors of licorice and cracked pepper. Also in the running are the Coho C2 Napa Valley 2012 (92, \$75), a refined and complex blend with floral red currant character and toasty spice and mineral aromas; and Duckhorn Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2013 (92, \$95), which combines good structure with a supple texture and red currant and dark chocolate flavors.

Kale Anderson, the former winemaker at Pahlmeyer who now consults for that Napa winery, said the 2013 vintage was the favorite of his career. It shows with the Pahlmeyer Merlot Napa Valley 2013 (92, \$85), a silky wine with a luxurious texture and a firm structure that eases in on the finish. Harvested from a vineyard that reaches 2,100 feet above the valley floor, the 2013 impressed Anderson with its balance. "The natural acidity was unbelievable," he says. "The intensity is off the charts. I think 2013 is a vintage my grandchildren will talk about."

Winemaker Mark Beringer has an affinity for Merlot. "I think it has so much potential," he says. That's apparent in the Beringer Merlot Howell Mountain Bancroft Ranch Vineyard 2013 (91, \$80), a plush and ripe red with a complex core of blackberry and dusty dried herb flavors. Beringer's last name is no coincidence—he is the great-great-grandson of Beringer founder Jacob Beringer. Bancroft Ranch is a hallmark Merlot, helping set the standard in California. The vineyard on Howell Mountain has dense, rocky soils that produce wines of intensity.

The 2013 vintage comes on the heels of a fine Merlot year in 2012. "There have been so many great vintages in a row it is crazy," Goldschmidt says. "For us old guys, with years of perspective, we get upset because it looks all too easy to the new guys."

The 2013 season was long and offered plenty of sunshine, but temperatures rarely spiked above the mid-90s. The drought continued unabated, and while there were a few sprinkles in early fall, it was nothing like the late-season rain that plagued other recent harvests.

The challenge for winemakers in 2013 was building physiologically mature flavors without producing high sugars or overripe fruit. As a result, the 2013 Merlots are bigger and more concentrated—and somewhat more angular—than the 2012s.

The 2014 Merlots being released now indicate another promising vintage. The growing season was similar to that of 2013, getting off to an early start and staying sunny and warm. By midsummer, winemakers in some regions were concerned that sugars were ahead of flavor development, but cool weather in September stalled ripening.

My early take on the 2014s is that they're soft, plush and fairly ripe. What they lack in backbone they make up for in easy-drinking style. For many California Merlot fans, that's just what the doctor ordered.

Senior editor Tim Fish is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Merlot.