

Through the Grapevine

# The Myth of Merlot

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by Steven Mayer

HEN CBS'S 60 MINUTES aired its 1991 report on the "French paradox," U.S. wine sales soared. The report—which explored the perplexing contradiction between France's rich cuisine and its heart-healthy and slender population—suggested regular wine consumption gave Western Europeans a cardiovascular edge over their heavier American counterparts. In the intervening years, dozens of medical studies have supported the health benefits of moderate wine consumption. As a result, the image of wine as a healthier alternative to other beverages was born.

Almost overnight, millions of American beer drinkers and soft drink sippers went out in search of a red wine they could like. These wine neophytes wanted something softer and less "dry" than the somewhat negative perception of mouth-puckering sharpness they held of red wine.

Enter the magical Merlot.

Though quite similar to Cabernet Sauvignon in its flavor profiles and aromas, Merlot had a reputation for being softer, rounder, and more approachable in its youth than Cabernet. Suddenly, Merlot sales shifted into high gear. Wine producers quickly took note and began planting the variety everywhere—including places Merlot had no business being grown.

For a time, everybody seemed to want the M-wine in their glass.

But the reality of Merlot's performance in California is much more uneven than its reputation. Too often, wine lovers would uncork a Merlot for dinner only to say, "Gee, I could have had a Cabernet." Consumers quickly learned that the varietal's reputation for softness was not always borne out on the palate. On the contrary, some Merlots tasted like railroad spikes dipped in wine. Others simply had no stuffing.

But the experience of a good Merlot is not to be discounted. Usually blended with some Cabernet, Merlot's flavors can be supple and luxurious. Though the varietal's black cherry, plum and cassis aromas often mirror the characteristics of Cabernet, Merlot also may exhibit hints of dark chocolate and mocha. There's little doubt that a fine Merlot has the power to transform a single sip into a sensual experience.

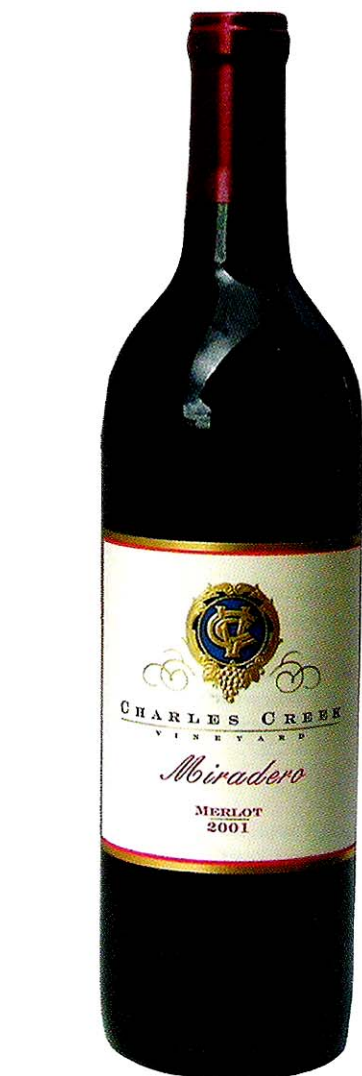
In France, red wines grown on Bordeaux's "right bank" in the communes of Pomerol and St. Emilion are made primarily with Merlot. Expensive, but often excellent.

In the United States, California is still Merlot central, but Washington state is producing a bevy of Merlots worth searching out. And for very good wines at great bargains, Chile is still a good bet.

There are so many wines out there to try—and so little time. So have some fun with your own exploration of Merlot. In the meantime, here are a few suggestions to get you started:

**Charles Creek 2001 "Miradero" Merlot Sonoma County / Napa Valley**—This relative newcomer has created a focused blend of Sonoma and Napa Valley fruit that exhibits a depth of character and structure that is missing in too many California Merlots. A little tough in the mouth in its youth, give this wine some time to open up in your glass—or try laying down a few bottles for longer term drinking.

**Matanzas Creek Winery 2001 Merlot Sonoma Valley**—This winery has been crafting world-class wines for many years. I remember seeing their Merlot priced at \$60 retail several years ago. But the global wine glut has convinced many wineries (and retailers) to bring their prices down



to a more realistic level. Now consumers can find this wine at between \$25 and \$30. Look for this wine's trademark intensity of flavor combined with aromas of cherry, toasted oak and chocolate. This is another wine to sip with rich cheeses or juicy meats to help soften its youthful structure. Keep a few in your cellar to drink over the next 5 to 8 years.

**L'Ecole No. 41 2001 Merlot Walla Walla Valley**—This Washington state winery has earned a well-deserved reputation for producing at least four separate bottlings of top-quality Merlot. Still relatively unknown in California, these wines are worth the search for their often supple texture and intense and concentrated fruit. Like many reds from the Pacific Northwest, they usually exhibit strong hints of fresh herbs, especially sage.

**Montes Alpha Merlot Colchagua Valley Chile**—At under \$16, this wine is worth a try in almost any vintage. Vibrant fruit, complex aromas and velvet tannins all come together in this easy-to-drink red from South America. One of the best values going in Merlot today. ■