

## TASTINGS

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### Merlot's Midrange Crisis

Why Spending a Bit More  
On This Popular Red  
Doesn't Always Pay Off  
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We wouldn't normally have Merlot for our anniversary, but this is special. Our column is 10 years old this week and since the very first wine we wrote about was American Merlot, it seemed like a good idea to revisit it. Or at least it seemed like a good idea at the time.

In 1998, Merlot was hot. Americans were increasingly turning to red wine, often because of its widely reported health benefits, and they found they liked the smooth, supple and easy tastes of Merlot. Sales of California Merlot increased 12-fold between 1990 and 1998. By 2000, Merlot surpassed Cabernet Sauvignon as America's favorite California red.

But bad things were happening to Merlot. It was getting sweet, simple and alcoholic. We rarely found Merlot under \$20 that we really liked and while we found a big quality difference above \$20, with far more wines to enjoy above that line, we still cautioned that the Merlot aisle could be a dangerous place at any price point. It was clear to us that vintners were killing the golden goose and, indeed, in 2006 Merlot fell back behind Cabernet in the hearts and sales of America, according to figures from Impact Databank.

The last broad blind tasting we conducted of midrange American Merlot -- wines that cost from \$20 to \$50 -- was three years ago. It was clearly time to revisit them. We bought more than 50 from store shelves. We focused on the 2004 and 2005 vintages, because those are the ones you are most likely to see. Most of the wines, which came from California and Washington, are well-known names, but we also included some small-production wines that we happened to run across. As always, we were not looking for "America's best midrange Merlot," but were trying to get a sense of the current state of the wine.

#### A Growing Gulf

We couldn't help but notice that the Merlot price gulf is growing. With competition in

this part of the market quite keen -- everyone makes Merlot these days, but fewer people are drinking it -- there are loads of Merlots available for less than \$20. Many of the best Merlots, meantime, have risen above \$50. Our long-time favorite, Paloma, for instance, is around \$65 and our best-of-tasting last time, Duckhorn, has crept up beyond \$50. Still, we had no problem getting plenty of wines for a blind tasting.

#### THE DOW JONES MIDRANGE MERLOT INDEX

In a blind tasting of American Merlots that cost between \$20 and \$50 from the 2004 and 2005 vintages, these were our favorites. Five of these nine are repeat favorites and are names to keep in mind: Markham, Franciscan, Provenance, Rombauer and Whitehall Lane. In general, these would age nicely for at least a couple of years. Serve with meats, stews and savory vegetable dishes.

**Kendall-Jackson "Grand Reserve" 2004 (Sonoma/Napa).** \$21.99. Very Good. *Best of tasting.* Dark and earthy, quite ripe yet restrained, with blackberry fruit. Good structure, with mouth-coating chocolate and cinnamon and a nicely dry finish. Could age. We liked the 2005 just as much.

**Markham Vineyards 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$20. Very Good. *Best value.* Life, structure and good tannins. Some black-cherry tastes, with minerals, tightly wound fruit and bracing acidity. Very pleasing, especially at the price (we saw it on sale at one store for \$15.99).

**Cuvaison Estate Wines 2004 (Carneros, Napa Valley).** \$27. Good/Very Good. Pleasant and likeable, with medium body and a long, lovely finish that's very food-friendly.

**Franciscan 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$20. Good/Very Good. Still quite young, with intensity, good minerals and serious tastes that require food. Better in a couple of years.

**Merryvale Vineyards "Starmont" 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$24. Good/Very Good. Classy wine. Tight and earthy, with ripe, black fruit. A wine that announces itself, very much not a dumbed-down Merlot.

**Provenance Vineyards 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$26.95. Good/Very Good. Soft and pleasant and very easy to like. Nicely balanced, happy to be charming instead of powerful. Good with relaxed, easy food.

**Rombauer Vineyards 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$27.95. Good/Very Good. Crisper than most, with dark earth and some herbs. Nicely grapey, with a clean, happy finish.

**Selby Winery 2004 (Sonoma County) 2004.** \$24.20. Good/Very Good. A Merlot for Merlot-lovers -- soft, with broad, velvety, chocolate tastes. Friendly wine.

**Whitehall Lane Winery 2004 (Napa Valley).** \$22.99. Good/Very Good. Spicy and interesting, with a serious core of black fruit and a lively finish. We didn't like the 2005 (tasted twice) nearly as much.

*NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in New Jersey, New York and Texas. Prices vary widely.*

We were not pleased. The wines were generally lousy, clumsy, hard to drink.

charmless, alcoholic and uninteresting. After our first flight, we wrote of one common characteristic: "Oak for oak's sake, an overlay of it, not integrated. Like someone put a drop of oak into the wine and it's floating on top." Yech. After the second flight, in which the wines had a remarkably consistent blahness, we wrote: "It's like they've made mediocre Merlot into an art form."

We were well into our tasting before we finally had a wine that rated Very Good. "Tight blueberry, blackberry fruit. Dark, minerally and dry. Tight and classy. Young. Lots of mouth-coating chocolate." This was a wine that reminded us that Merlot is noble, one of the world's great grapes, the grape of world-class wines like Château Pétrus, a key ingredient in many of the world's most-famous reds. When we unbagged the wines, we were surprised to discover that this was Kendall-Jackson "Grand Reserve" 2004, which cost \$21.99. K-J helped stoke America's thirst for wine with its approachable and reasonably priced varietals and for that we and all wine lovers should be grateful. But we wouldn't have guessed this giant winery would have done so well against so many wineries with far smaller production and more highly regarded reputations, including so many names that make us smile.

### **A Deja-Vu Moment**

Deep into the tasting, we finally had a second wine that rated Very Good. "Fresh, clean and crisp, with good balance, good acidity, ample fruit and earth," we wrote. This turned out to be...

Kendall-Jackson "Grand Reserve" 2005. It also cost \$21.99. We bought another bottle each of the 2004 and 2005 K-J and included them in later flights and our notes were consistent.

Kendall-Jackson says it made 8,700 cases of the 2004 (which was 4% Cabernet Sauvignon) and 24,198 cases of the 2005 (which was 10% Cabernet). It was distributed nationwide. How can it make such a good Merlot in such quantities and at such a low price when so many others fail? We called George Rose, a spokesman for Kendall-Jackson, and he told us that the fruit came from mountain vineyards where Merlot does extremely well, while many other wineries plant in valleys and produce so-so fruit. "We own some pretty spectacular mountain ridges," he said. As for the threefold increase in production from 2004 to 2005, he said that years ago when consumer demand for their Merlot was strong, they planted more and those vineyards just came online with the 2005 vintage. "We could see what was happening. When everyone was proclaiming the death of Merlot, it simply wasn't the case for our company," he said.

In the attached index, you will see our favorites from our tasting. Only the K-J and Markham rated higher than Good/Very Good, which is crazy for wines that cost up to \$50. There were some good ones, of course, but, as Dottie said, "You shouldn't have to kiss so many frogs." Certainly, there is no reason why America can't produce good Merlot, and it has. We were so bummed about this tasting that we went back into our cellar and pulled out some old Merlots. The 1992 Pine Ridge was beautiful -- intense,

structured and still young -- and the 1994 Havens was earthy, classy and fully ready to drink. But in terms of wines on shelves right now, personally, with so many outstanding red wines arriving from all over the world with interesting, food-friendly tastes offered by thoughtful vintners, we would simply avoid the Merlot aisle. Maybe things will improve for our 15th anniversary. We'll let you know.

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