

Casa Festiva -- November 2006

Mad About My Merlot

By Katy Budge

(About Merlot ... why we should still love the grape ... some Central Coast tasting notes ... some Merlot trivia.)

So what's a gal like me doing writing about Merlot? Well, call it defense of the underdog, but this noble varietal deserves some support in a post-"Sideways" world.

"Noble?" you ask. Well, consider this: in his 1973 "Encyclopedia of Wine," the venerable Frank Schoonmaker described Merlot as a "distinguished red wine



grape, nearly as important as the two Cabernets in the Bordeaux Country, where it gives softness, fruit, grace and charm to many famous wines that would be less attractive without it." For example, ever hear of a little label called Chateau Petrus? Well, typically it's about 90 percent Merlot -- enough said.

Supposedly, ever since Pinot-phile Miles derisively declared in the movie "Sideways" that "... if anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am NOT drinking any f***king Merlot!" sales of the M-word fell into dramatic decline. Certainly, there was a noticeable downtick in popularity, but really sales were already starting to decline in 2003, the year before the movie debuted. Let's face it -- although those who love Pinot will love it forever, a lot of people who found themselves in a relationship with Merlot were just waiting for an excuse to say "it's not you, it's me" and dash off to the latest wine trend.

I say, let 'em go. Truth be told, the varietal could stand a little cooling off so its true nature can re-emerge. Just as a blockbuster movie or TV show begets countless lackluster mimics, so it was with Merlot in the United States during the 1980s and '90s. California plantings soared from less than 2000 acres in 1985 to over 50,000 acres in 2003; in 1995, there were 1.6 million cases sold in stores, by 2005 there were 7.8 million. As you might have guessed -- or even tasted for yourself -- that kind of growth and volume can lead to some pretty bad wine when it's being made by people who are chasing dollars instead of quality.

Thankfully, there are plenty of winemakers out there who understand the beauty of Merlot and are making great wine from it, either as a stand-alone varietal or using it as part of a blend. On the Central Coast, a list of those names would certainly have to include Alex Villicana of Villicana Winery, Robert Dunning of Dunning Vineyards & Winery, Mark Cummings of Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards, Steve Peck of Five Rivers Winery, and Adam LaZarre of Hahn Estates, whose 2004 Merlot won Best of Class at the 2006 Central Coast Wine Challenge.

For Alex Villicana, whose Estate Merlots are classic benchmarks of the varietal's potential, the key is in crop management. Because Merlot can tend to be vigorous (one of the characteristics that probably led to its meteoric success in the general market), "we go for very low-yield crops, maybe about two or two-and-a-half tons per acre. We only have about an acre of it in our vineyard and we're able to dry farm it, which gives it good concentration in the berries."

He added that the 2006 harvest came in at about two tons, and "looks fantastic, with incredible color, and raspberry and perfume characteristics. The last time we had that with the Merlot was in 2001," which turned out to be an award-winning bottling for the family-owned winery. Villicana likes to use all French oak for his Merlot, with about 60 percent neutral oak, and about 40 percent new oak, which offers "some vanilla notes, another layer of complexity, and enough tannins to add a little longevity to the wine."

If you're not a red wine drinker, Merlot can offer an easy introduction. The aromas and fruit profiles typically include plum, currants, blackberry, and sometimes even smoke, chocolate, and violets. Unlike big tannic varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah, Merlot has soft tannins that offer structure to the wine without overpowering your taste buds.

The inherent bouquet and fruitiness of Merlot are among its selling points, but sometimes that can make it a tad tricky to match with food. However, it's usually a spot-on match with light cheeses such as a sheep's milk or soft Portuguese, or with cheese and vegetables dishes like fondue or raclette. Depending on the style of Merlot, it's also a good pairing with roasted meats like turkey (especially the dark meat), and its underlying herbaceousness teams up nicely with pesto sauces and grass-fed beef. Because of the wine's gentle tannins, it doesn't fight with the raw tomatoes in bruschetta or heirlooms and mozzarella salads, and don't be afraid to try it with grilled wild salmon as well.

In "researching" this column, I was also reminded that Merlot can also be great on its own as an aperitif, so feel free to pair it with friends, roaring fireplaces, or even a rainy day and a good book.

Merlot Facts:

Reportedly, Merlot did not appear as a stand alone California varietal until the end of the 1970s.

Merlot is the most widely planted grape in the Bordeaux, and the third most widely planted red grape in France, behind Carignane and Grenache.

While "Meritage" is typically marketed as a "Bordeaux blend," the term -- pronounced like "heritage" -- was actually coined in 1981 by an American winery. In 1988, the Meritage Society was formed, trademarking the name and making it available only to member wineries making blended wines from "the 'noble' Bordeaux varietals including: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot and Malbec or Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Sauvignon Vert."

A well-crafted Merlot typically has an aging potential of about 7-10 years. Take, for example, two Dunning Vineyards Estate Merlots: the 1997 should probably be drunk fairly soon, but still has great structure and would be a good match with dark, grilled meats, hearty tomato sauces, and medium-bodied cheeses; the 1999 has considerably more fruit, and is a great pairing with lighter tomato dishes or grilled herbed chicken.

Tasting Notes:

2001 Dover Canyon Cougar Ridge Merlot -- nice balance and mouth feel with soft tannins, blackberry and some dried apple on the finish; great with smoked, spicy artisan cheese and brings out the savoriness of steak.

2003 Kenneth Volk Vineyards SLO County Merlot -- gentle tannins with a hint of eucalyptus and soft, bright fruit like plums and back cherry; great with Italian tomato dishes like a rich tomato bacon sauce.

2003 Penman Springs Paso Robles Merlot -- gentle, but sturdy tannins, plum and light berry flavors on nose and palate; good with light cheeses such as sheep's milk.

2004 Villicana Estate Merlot -- very well-balanced with a long finish; hints of bright plum and blackberry, with the fragrance and fruitiness expected from a young release of this varietal as well as pleasing darker undertones. Pair with Portuguese cheese, heirloom tomatoes with black pepper, and grilled top sirloin; also sturdy enough to hold its hold with slightly spicy fare. (If you can still find the 2003, it has very similar profiles, with a slight, pleasing hint of smoke on the nose.)

2004 Wild Horse Unbridled Merlot -- notes of black cherry and bright fruit with a bit of briar on the nose; very well balanced with just the right hint of oak; a decadent match with a rich gorgonzola cream pasta sauce.