

Bringing Back Merlot Misunderstood grape grabs its spot as a star varietal

By Jessica Yadegaran
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IN THE documentary "Merlove," filmmaker Rudy McClain surfs in a sea of mediocre Merlot. His animated protagonist, a lovingly made bottle of elegant Merlot named Merlove, is forced to dump herself into this ocean thanks to something called the New World Handicap and a line actor Paul Giamatti uttered four years ago.

You remember the scene in "Sideways." Jack (Thomas Hayden Church) is trying to convince Miles (Giamatti) that drinking what their dates desire is the fastest way to score. "No," Miles retorts. "If anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any (expletive) Merlot!"

But that line is not really to blame for the grape's bad rap, says McClain, whose Merlot comeback film debuted at Napa's Copia last month — and returns for another screening Dec. 19.

McClain and many of the world's foremost Merlot producers, including Chris Phelps of Swanson Vineyards and Jean-Claude Berrouet of Chateau Petrus, arguably one of the world's most revered and most expensive wines, are advocating for the misunderstood grape, and a current vintage of luscious offerings certainly helps. Take that, Miles.

Swanson Vineyards is Napa Valley's largest producer of estate Merlot, and Phelps, its winemaker, is a champion of the grape. Phelps used to travel around the country giving seminars on Merlot's American demise. It dates back almost 20 years, he explains, when Central Valley producers turned the Bordeaux grape into a cash crop and planted it in soil meant for corn and lettuce. They were riding on the coattails of a 1991 news story touting the French Paradox — that one reason French people suffer less coronary heart disease despite eating more saturated fats could very well be their red wine consumption.

"Wine sales literally shot up overnight," says Phelps, who was trained at the legendary Petrus and at one point operated a Web site, merlotfightsback.net. Why Merlot? Simple: "It wasn't as expensive as Cabernet Sauvignon and it was easy to pronounce," he adds.

Plus, unlike Pinot Noir, the varietal Miles praised and the one that saw a near-30-percent spike in sales following "Sideways," Merlot is a forgiving grape. It is soft and approachable, lacking the astringent tannins that turn some people off of red wine. Even under less-than-ideal growing conditions, it produces a large crop with rich color and decent acidity.

Despite the bad press, it is still the second most popular red varietal in the United States. In fact, Merlot sales have doubled in the past eight years, thanks in part to an increase in

premium producers who specialize in the varietal and grow their own grapes in appropriate appellations. With quality comes price.

Aaron Pott is just such a producer. Pott is winegrower for Napa's Blackbird Vineyards, which makes Merlot in the spirit of Pomerol, the grape's home. The word "Merlot" is French patois for "little blackbird."

Pott spent five years in nearby Saint-Emilion before coming to Napa. There, wine is labeled according to where the grapes are grown (here, and in other New World regions, labels are varietal-based). "I'd be on an airplane and hear people say, 'Do you have a Merlot?' The server would say, 'Well, we have something from Saint-Emilion, and the person would say, 'No I want Merlot,'" Pott recalls, laughing.

Like many artisan producers, Pott is serious about growing Merlot. The terroir of Blackbird's Oak Knoll District vineyard is well-suited for the workhorse grape. The location benefits from morning fog and clay loam soil, which give Merlot intensity, both in structure and flavor, Pott says. Harvest comes late — last week, in fact.

Couple that long growing season with a grape that — when grown in the right conditions — is able to balance brawn and acidity with richness and elegance, and you've got an extraordinary wine. One that's worth making a movie about. And it's not "Merlove." At the end of "Sideways," Miles' most prized wine is a 1961 Chateau Cheval Blanc, which happens to be more than half Merlot.

Five great Merlots

- 2006 Shafer Merlot Napa Valley (\$48). An unusually long, dry hang time yielded photo-quality grapes and an opulent wine that has aromas of big, dark fruits and flavors of plum, pepper and licorice.
- 2004 Castello Di Amorosa Merlot Napa Valley (\$32). Beautiful aromas of ripe spice and licorice lead to flavors of dark cherries and toasty oak.
- 2003 Chateau Clarke Lustrac (\$27). A blend of Merlot (70 percent) and Cabernet Sauvignon (30 percent) that is concentrated in every way: Nearly black in the glass, it shows powerful fruit flavors, aromas of wood and espresso and a chewy finish.
- 2005 Columbia Crest Grand Estates Merlot (\$13). Washington shares latitude with Bordeaux, and some argue that the Columbia Valley has better weather conditions for this grape. Classic aromas of spice, cocoa and blackberries with a velvety finish. A value.
- 2005 Blackbird Vineyards Proprietary Red Wine (\$80). A layered beauty with immense acidity and all the other elements of a balanced wine: Equal parts aroma and flavors of smoke, mocha and dark cherries with a resonating finish