



MERLOT'S BIG MAKEOVER

Back from the pits of wine irrelevance, Merlots are reclaiming their place in the wine world—and Washington is producing some of the very best **By Leslie Kelly**

BACK IN THE 1990s, Merlot was the Lady Gaga of Washington wines: red hot and showing no signs of cooling. Along with Riesling, this Bordeaux varietal was the state's future. Then, fickle tasters turned away, looking for the next big thing, and a line tossed off in a movie—Miles in the 2004 comedy *Sideways* declares that he would never deign to drink Merlot!—echoed the sentiment: Merlot's sun was setting.

Today, fans of Washington Merlot have new reason to cheer. Wineries are reporting a boost in Merlot sales. And people no longer pull their glass away when that movie-maligned varietal is offered at tastings. Yes, that really happened, at least to Shannon Jones, the owner/winemaker at Hestia Cellars, who sides with other winemakers who say they can't believe the lasting effect *Sideways* had on Merlot.

"There's no question people are drinking more Merlot these days, when only two years ago, if I tried to pour it for some people at a tasting, they'd refuse, often mentioning that movie," says Jones, whose Woodinville-based winery launched in 2004 with a strong commitment to Merlot. "Washington grows such great, wonderfully balanced Merlot," says Jones, who sources his grapes from Boushey Vineyard in Yakima Valley and StoneTree Vineyard in the Columbia Valley, among others.

Last summer, Northstar Winery in Walla Walla put on a Merlot "camp" for wine

writers. "It was not only an opportunity to taste some truly remarkable wines, but also to experience one of the most exciting regions in America," says Brian Freedman, a Philadelphia-based writer and contributor to Mariani's Virtual Gourmet Newsletter (johnmariani.com). Campers explored why Washington is ideal for growing this grape, with discussions led by Dr. Kevin Pogue, a geology professor at Whitman College and a viticulture consultant. "In the late summer and fall, our temperatures drop off more rapidly than in California, because we're at a higher latitude that is more similar to Bordeaux's," Pogue says. Winemaker Mike Januik has another theory: "[The grapes are] planted on the original rootstock, which gives them more character, more oomph."

Januik, who has been making Merlot for more than 20 years, first at Chateau Ste. Michelle and now at a winery that bears his name in Woodinville, said the quality of the fruit has increased dramatically as the vines have gotten older. "The vines aren't gangly like when they're younger and they produce grapes that are well balanced, with a lot of structure," he says. "I can't tell you how many times I've poured Merlot for somebody and have them say it tastes more like a Cab."

Marty Clubb, from L'Ecole No 41 in Walla Walla, says Merlot is a winemaker's dream, because it thrives in various terroir. "Winemakers have the ability to draw from different sources, making for more interesting Merlots," says Clubb, who noted the winery's restaurant sales of Merlot have quadrupled this year.

So, when will this versatile grape be crowned the next hot thing? It's still a challenge to win over the skeptics, says Jeff Fournier, a buyer for Esquin Wine Merchants. "When customers do pick up a bottle of Merlot, they tend to go for the old favorites made by veterans—the Leonetti, Northstar, Januik and Pepper Bridge," he says. But that could change at any time. "There are always trends in wine drinking, and it just makes sense that consumers would embrace a grape that's the same as the grape used in some of the best wines produced in Bordeaux." **S**



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LESLIE'S WINE PICKS



L'ECOLE NO 41 2008 COLUMBIA VALLEY MERLOT (\$25) Marty Clubb has been making consistently fine Merlot for 22 years, the wine showing its best varietal character with blackberry, black cherry and spice notes. The fruit was sourced from eight vineyards, including Seven Hills and Klipsun, giving it great structure and the kind of complexity that promises to age well. This food-friendly wine can go casual or dress up, partnering well with barbecued ribs, pizza or a grilled rib-eye.

PEDESTAL 2007 COLUMBIA VALLEY MERLOT (\$55) This powerhouse might well be the best Merlot made in Washington. Long Shadows owner Allen Shoup tapped Bordeaux-bred winemaker Michael Rolland for this project, which sources fruit from vineyards in the Red Mountain AVA and the Wahluke Slope. It sips velvety smooth, but with complexity that comes from combining grapes from various vineyards and considerable time aging in French oak. Serve it with a Parmesan-topped onion soup.

JANUIK 2008 COLUMBIA VALLEY MERLOT (\$25) Some industry insiders have crowned Mike Januik the Merlot king because he's been making that wine shine for nearly 30 years. His latest might be his greatest, showing intensity and muscle that's balanced by elegant fruit. Pour this alongside the holiday roasts, turkey, duck or beef.

HESTIA 2008 COLUMBIA VALLEY (\$28) There's a whole lot going on in this super-approachable wine made with fruit from StoneTree Vineyard on the Wahluke Slope. Bright cherry flavors pop, but are balanced by plenty of acid, for a long, lingering finish. Just 250 cases were made, and it has sold out at the winery, but look for it at specialty wine shops. Pair with a plate of stinky cheese, such as Port Madison's Mt. Rainier.