Red Robin ✓ Dine-in ✓ Curbside pickup ✓ Delivery

The Cool Kids Are Drinking Merlot

By Samantha Maxwell | May 10, 2024 | 4:12pm

Photo by Mauro Lima/Unsplash

DRINK > FEATURES > MERLOT

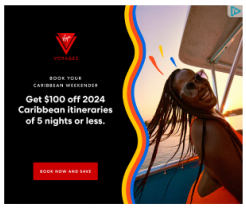
In the world of wine, there are grapes that fall into and out of fashion from time to time. When a wine grape falls out of fashion, wines made from that grape often see a slump in sales, so much so that, in some cases, wineries decide to pull out their vines to experiment with different, more lucrative grapes.

Until recently, Merlot was one of those wine grapes that seemed to have fallen from grace; it became known as a bland, unimpressive wine that paled in comparison to its richer, more fuller-bodied counterparts. But times—and tastes—are changing, and Merlot is poised to become the cool grape on the block once again.

A few Merlot-focused wineries are leading the charge. At Sullivan Rutherford Estate in Napa Valley, the red grape is undoubtedly the star of the show; the winery's bold and luscious Merlots rival the best Merlot-dominant Bordeauxs. Markham Vineyards, also located in Napa, similarly boasts a long-time commitment to Merlot. Under the care and consideration of these and other wineries, this wine is beginning to shed its less-than-favorable image and to be celebrated as the delicious wine it is.

Merlot's Fall From Grace

Many attribute Merlot's lack of popularity to the movie *Sideways*, in which Paul Giamatti's character disparaged the wine (despite drinking it at the end of the movie), instead championing Pinot Noir. The 2004 film had an outsized impact on the industry for years. According to Kimberlee Nicholls, winemaker at Markham, "*Sideways* impacted the wine industry as a whole for over a decade, with Merlot sales declining and Pinot Noir sales increasing an estimated 16%."



"Every time I talk to someone about Merlot, Sideways is immediately referenced," echoes Sullivan Rutherford Estate's winemaker, Jeff Cole. But he doesn't believe that the movie alone was responsible for Merlot's declining popularity. "The movie definitely played a part in Merlot's negative perception, but even then, the movie was a symptom of a larger narrative."

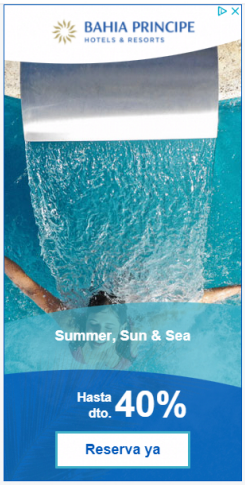
"Merlot was first a victim of its own success as its popularity drove growers to expand plantings to areas not as well-suited to high-quality production," explains Cole. "Then it fell victim to Cabernet Sauvignon's success as growers and producers focused their efforts on Cabernet and the higher prices that came with it."

Cabernet Sauvignon, often referred to as the "king" of Napa, exploded in popularity for the past few decades, as tastes began to favor intense, bold, tannic red wines. In general, Merlot tends to be a bit lighter-bodied than Cabernet, which is why the latter saw such wild success. These days, though, the landscape has started to shift, with many younger drinkers preferring lighter, more approachable reds. As big, bold Cabs start to wane in popularity, Merlot is well-poised to reclaim its throne.

Merlot's Shifting Tide

Nicholls is witnessing the rise in Merlot's popularity. "I have noticed a renewed interest in Merlot in recent years," she says. "As younger wine consumers seek more balanced and approachable options, Merlot's softer tannins and smooth texture make it an appealing choice that can be enjoyed on its own or with a wide variety of foods."

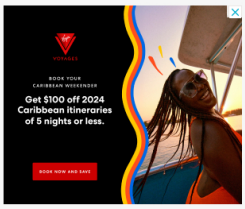
Her wines don't sacrifice the bold flavor profile that many of Napa's most celebrated wines are known for, but they offer a softness and a nuance that's not always perceptible in Cabernet Sauvignon. "I love that Merlot offers a soft and approachable profile without compromising on complexity or depth," she explains. "It's the perfect counterbalance to Napa's tendency toward big, bold, and powerful



Most Popular

- Home
- This Week's Best New Songs
- Slow-Burn Coming-of-Age Drama *Fancy Dance* Confronts Stacked Odds Against Indigenous Women
- Disney Is Reportedly Still Considering the Return of Nic Cage to *National Treasure 3*
- Tomb Raider Is For Squares: How Grids Defined the Original Classic
- Resonant Drama *Green Border* Finds Compassion in Crisis
- People Apparently Love Footlong Foods
- The Decemberists Pave Their Own Way
- *Survivor* 46 Finalist Ben Katzman Heads Back to Fiji on *Tears On The Beach*
- *Pretty Little Liars: Summer School* Bosses and Cast Break Down Those Shocking Finale Twists

More Most Popular



Editors' Picks

- Best New Albums: This Week's Records to Stream
- The Best Sitcoms on Netflix Right Now (May 2024)
- The 50 Best TV Shows on Netflix, Ranked (June 2024)
- 5 Burning Questions We Still Have About *GLOW*
- 9 Times Sitcom B-Plots Were Better Than the Main Storylines
- A Love Letter to *I'm Sorry* and a Tribute to Funny Moms in 3 Bits
- An Ode to the Horniest Sitcom Parents, the Belchers and the Wilkersons
- The 30 Best Apple TV+ Shows, Ranked
- The 10 Best *Bob's Burgers* Thanksgiving Episodes
- The Best Halloween Sitcom Episodes

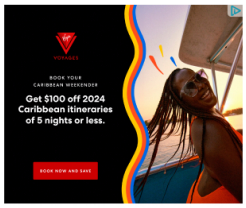
Jezebel

- In 'Power of the Dream,' the WNBA's Activism Gets Its Due
- Dems Introduce the 'Stop Comstock Act' to Repeal Abortion Sections of 1873 Law
- Firerose Accuses Billy Ray Cyrus of Filing for Divorce Day Before Double Mastectomy
- Phew! Sag Harbor Hotel Says Justin Timberlake Still Always Welcome
- Welp, This Is Getting Scary
- It's Official: Arizona's 1864 Abortion Ban Won't Take Effect
- The Skims Paycheck Cannot Be This Good

More Jezebel

Splinter

Cabs."



Cole has seen a similar pattern playing out. "I have noticed an uptick in interest in Merlot over the past few years, especially on the higher-end side of things," he says. "People have been inundated with Napa Cabernet Sauvignon over the past 20 years and are ready for something different."

A Grape With Incredible Versatility

Merlot is often characterized as a grape that doesn't have much flavor, that results in thin, watery wines without much depth. While it's true that some Merlots do feature this kind of flavor profile, not all Merlot is destined to have the same fate. In fact, it's a grape that can yield an incredibly large range of wines depending on how and where it's planted and how it's vinified, or actually transformed into wine.

"Merlot is a very versatile variety, which most people don't realize," says Cole. "From a winemaking perspective, Merlot can adapt to the environment that it is grown in, which makes it easy to produce wines that are stylistically aligned with any winemaker's philosophy." Cole works with Merlot grapes that are planted in a warmer part of the Napa Valley, so his wines tend to have a lot of structure and complexity. These are serious wines that can stand up to Napa's legacy of bold Cabs. Cole says, "My goal is to produce Merlot that has great depth and personality!"

Nicholls highlights Merlot's versatility in a different sense. As the climate continues to change, creating increasing challenges for winemakers, Merlot is gaining traction as a more climate change-friendly variety than many other types of grapes. "Merlot is often regarded as a more climate-resilient grape than Cabernet Sauvignon due to its adaptability to various growing conditions and its ability to ripen earlier in the season," she says. "Merlot can grow in both moderate and warm climates, and while styles may vary between climates, it remains a versatile grape variety that can thrive in dramatically different climates. As climate change brings warmer temperatures and variable weather patterns, Merlot's adaptability makes it well-suited to thrive in these changing environments."

It's great to have an understanding of the types of wines you tend to enjoy so you can more easily pick out a bottle when you go out to dinner with family or friends. But those preferences need not be dogmatic; when we keep an open mind and choose wines made by producers who care about their product, their grapes and their land, we're likely to find delicious wines made from a wide variety of grapes. Merlot is no exception.

Maybe you tasted a Merlot 15 years ago and hated it. That's a valid reaction. But times are changing, and producers like Markham Vineyards and Sullivan Rutherford Estate are proving that Merlot can and should be taken seriously. And if you want to be on the cutting edge of what the cool kids are drinking, a well-crafted Merlot may just be the best place to start.

Samantha Maxwell is a food writer and editor based in Boston. Follow her on Twitter at @samseating.

Log In/Sign Up

Please Log In to continue the discussion.

0 COMMENTS

Share Tweet Submit Pin

Tags merlot napa valley red wine

Splinter

The Houthis Have Disrupted Capitalism and American Empire in their Defense of Gaza

Did the U.K. Supreme Court Kill the Country's Fossil Fuel Industry?

Summer is For Competing Climate Disasters

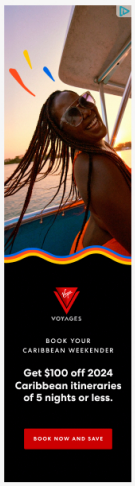
Please Do Not Let Elon Musk Destroy the Ozone Layer

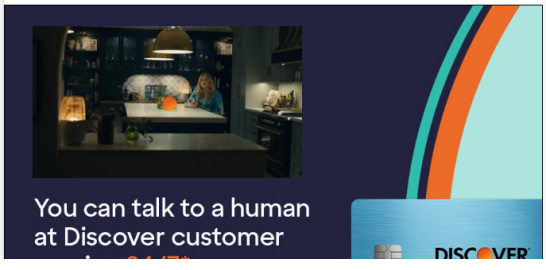
Hot Take: Jews Shouldn't Compare Themselves to Nazis

The Myth of Joe Biden's Red Line

Golf Will Never Love You Back

More Splinter





ADVERTISEMENT

GET PASTE RIGHT IN YOUR INBOX
The best music, movies, TV, books, comedy and more.
EMAIL ADDRESS
Sign Up