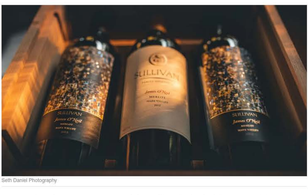
FOOD & DRINK / WINE

JULY 22, 2025

The Napa Valley Winery Making World-Class Merlot

Bottles that can hold their own with the best of Bordeaux.

By MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN



Seth Daniel Photography

Since the news was announced that Sullivan Rutherford Estate 2021 J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon was *Robb Report*'s Best American Cabernet Sauvignon of the Year, we have been reminded countless times that despite this accolade Sullivan Rutherford Estate is truly known among wine insiders for its incredible Merlot. The estate's owner and winemaker are so confident in their Merlot that winemaker Jeff Cole hosts a comparative tasting of his own bottles alongside the best from the great Right Bank houses of Bordeaux and the rolling hills of Bolgheri for consumers willing to pay $350 for the experience.

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The winery's emphasis on Merlot isn't accidental: Winemaker Jeff Cole says Sullivan has a deep-rooted legacy with the variety. It has been planted on the estate since founder James O'Neil Sullivan and his wife JoAnna purchased 26 acres of land in the heart of Napa Valley in 1972 and has been in production under their label since 1981. "In the late '80s and early '90s, Sullivan Merlot was considered one of the best in Napa; it's what really put the winery on the map," Cole tells *Robb Report*. Managing partner Juan Carlos Torres Padilla, whose investment firm acquired the property in 2018, believes that Sullivan earned its reputation for Merlot because it is one of the few estates in Napa Valley to "champion Merlot with the same focus, investment, and ambition typically reserved for Cabernet Sauvignon."

Cole thinks that Rutherford is one of the most underrated places in Napa for world-class Merlot. "Our Rutherford estate sits on gravelly, sand-laced loam soils that offer excellent drainage and natural vine stress, critical for developing phenolic complexity and tannin structure," he says. Between warm days that fully ripen the variety and cool nights that lock in acidity, the site gives "the best of both worlds: opulence with freshness." He also believes that "the reason it's harder to find great Merlots from Napa is that all the 'good dirt' is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon." Torres Padilla explains, "While much of Napa Valley eventually shifted its focus to Cabernet Sauvignon, driven by market demand and economics, Sullivan quietly stayed the course, continuing to produce Merlot-driven wines held in high regard."

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Tasting through Merlot

Jon Krondorfer

Having spent much of his adult life in France, Torres Padilla is more than familiar with some of the world's best Merlot, and when visiting more than 120 Napa Valley properties in his search to acquire a winery, he was especially impressed by Sullivan Rutherford Estate 2013 J.O Sullivan Founder's Reserve Merlot as well as the Cabernet Sauvignon, which were the first wines crafted by Cole. "As we continued our due diligence, tasting through library vintages, it became clear that the Merlot from this estate was something special," Torres Padilla says. Once the acquisition was complete, he brought on renowned vineyard manager Mike Wolf to oversee the farming of the 22-acre estate. After extensive soil studies, they decided to replant 8.5 acres of the vineyard, with approximately half of that dedicated to Merlot.

They have also expanded their vineyard holdings with two additional sites, one of which was purchased solely for the belief that it would be an exceptional place to grow Merlot. It is in the Soda Canyon area, located in the eastern foothills between Stags Leap District and Coombsville, and Torres Padilla tells *Robb Report*, "We planted the majority of this site to Merlot, and now six years on I can say it has exceeded our expectations." On top of the Founder's Reserve Merlot, the team has added a higher tier Merlot-driven family reserve wine called PA Vinea, which is blended from all three estate vineyards. "Rather than moving away from producing Merlot to focus on Cabernet Sauvignon like the majority of the Napa Valley has done, we doubled down," Torres Padilla says. Considering the number of people who associate Sullivan Rutherford Estate with its high-profile Merlot, it appears to be a bet that is paying off.

Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jenssen

Mike DeSimone and Jeff Jenssen, also known as the World Wine Guys, are wine, spirits, food, and travel writers, educators, and hosts. They have been featured guests on the Today Show, The Martha...

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