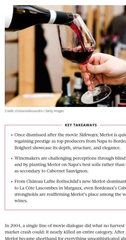
The Comeback Grape: Why Serious Merlot Is Finally Getting Its Due

Top winemakers are betting big on the grape again.

By Jessica Dupuy Published on February 20, 2026



Credit: cristianbalcanphoto / Getty Images

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Once dismissed after the movie *Sideways*, Merlot is quietly regaining prestige as top producers from Napa to Bordeaux and Bolgheri showcase its depth, structure, and elegance.
- Winemakers are challenging perceptions through blind tastings and by planting Merlot on Napa's best soils rather than treating it as secondary to Cabernet Sauvignon.
- From Chateau Lafite Rothschild's new Merlot-dominant Anneillan to La Crête Lucendieres in Margaux, even Bordeaux's Cabernet strongholds are reaffirming Merlot's place among the world's great wines.

In 2004, a single line of movie dialogue did what no harvest failure or market crash could: it nearly killed an entire category. After *Sideways*, Merlot became shorthand for everything unsophisticated about American wine culture, and the industry largely obliged. Twenty years later, serious producers are making the counterargument. At Rothman Rutherford Estate in Napa, winemaker Jeff Cole makes it one blind tasting at a time.

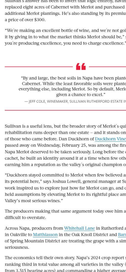
These anonymous glasses of 2018 Merlot sit on the table — one from Bordeaux's Pomerol, one from Tuscany's Bolgheri, one from the vineyards at Rutherford Estate. He doesn't say which is which. But his point is profound. Merlot should be evaluated among the places where it has long been iconic. No speech about "sarking" the grape, no apology for a category that lost its footing. Instead, Cole asks tasters to start where most arguments about wine shouldn't with what's in the glass. Only after they've talked about structure, fruit, and tannin does he reveal the labels.

What Cole is really doing is reminding people that America's complicated relationship with Merlot is largely Bordeaux's problem. Elsewhere, the grape has never needed rehabilitation.

RELATED: Tired of Pricey Cabernet? These 17 Washington Reds Are Worth Your Attention

Some of the most coveted red wines in the world

In Pomerol, Petrus is planted entirely to Merlot on a plateau of blue clay. It has long been considered one of the most profound wines on earth: silky, layered, almost otherworldly in concentration. Across the Right Bank, Chateau Angelus and Chateau Cheval Blanc have built their identities around Merlot-dominant blends of remarkable depth and aging potential. Even in the Médoc, Merlot has historically been the supporting player to Cabernet's superstar role. Merlot fortified the cool-vintage personality of Bordeaux's finest and helped define the Super Tuscan category on the world stage.



Credit: Conor Kruger / Getty Images

Perhaps the most telling signal that Merlot's moment is arriving again comes from an unexpected direction. Even the Cabernet iconic estates of Bordeaux's Left Bank — long standard-bearers for Cabernet Sauvignon are now turning their attention to the grape.

Chateau Lafite Rothschild, the first growth whose Pauillac terroir is synonymous with Cabernet dominance, quietly introduced Anneillan with the 2018 vintage: a Merlot-dominant blend and the house's first entirely new wine in more than a century. Meanwhile, at Chateau Lascombes in Margaux, director Axel Heitz — who spent more than fifteen years building Mauzac into one of Italy's most revered bottles — arrived in 2023 and swiftly established a new cuvée of 60-year-old Merlot to produce La Crête Lucendieres, a 100% Merlot bottling launched with the 2022 vintage and priced above the estate's grand vin. That the man who spent nearly two decades overseeing Bolghieri's most celebrated Merlot has brought that same conviction to the Left Bank is no coincidence. It is, as Cole might put it, a palate-training exercise on a grand scale.

Move over, Cabernet: Merlot's quiet rehabilitation in the U.S.

Back in Rutherford, Sullivan's approach is rooted in a frank diagnosis of how the category got into trouble in the first place.

"By and large, the best soils in Napa have been planted with Cabernet," says Cole. "While the least favorable soils were planted with everything else, including Merlot. So by default, Merlot wasn't given a chance to excel."

Sullivan's answer has been to invest that logic entirely. Among his recently replaced eight acres of Cabernet with Merlot and purchased more land for additional Merlot plantings. He's also standing by its premium quality, with a price of over $300.

"We're making an excellent bottle of wine, and we're not going to handicap it by giving in to what the market thinks Merlot should be," says Cole. "If you're producing excellence, you need to charge excellence."

> "By and large, the best soils in Napa have been planted with Cabernet. While the least favorable soils were planted with everything else, including Merlot. So by default, Merlot wasn't given a chance to excel."
>
> — JEFF COLE, WINEMAKER, SULLIVAN RUTHERFORD ESTATE IN NAPA

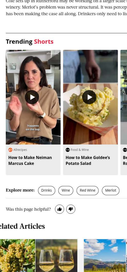
Sullivan is a useful lens, but the broader story of Merlot's quiet rehabilitation runs deeper than one estate — and it stands on the shoulders of those who came before. Dan Duckhorn of Duckhorn Vineyards, who passed away on Wednesday, February 25, was among the first to argue that Napa Merlot deserved to be taken seriously. Long before the category had cachet, he built an identity around it at a time when few others would, earning him a reputation as the valley's original champion of the grape.

"Duckhorn stayed committed to Merlot when few believed and invested in its potential here," says Joshua Lowrd, general manager at Sullivan. "His work inspired us to explore just how far Merlot can go, and challenge long-held assumptions by elevating Merlot to its rightful place among Napa Valley's most serious wines."

The producers making that same argument today owe him a debt that is difficult to overstate.

Across Napa, producers from Whitehall Lane and Thornbrick in Oakville to Matthiasson in the Oak Knoll District and Barnett Vineyards of Spring Mountain District are treating the grape with a similar level of seriousness.

The economics tell their own story. Napa's 2024 crop report shows Merlot ranking third in total value among all varieties in the valley (50,920 tons from 1,353 bearing acres) and commanding a higher average price per ton than Chardonnay despite the white grape having more than 2,000 additional bearing acres. The grape never actually left. It just stopped being fashionable to take seriously.



Credit: Photo by Jak Kilby for Sullivan Rutherford Estate

At Whitehall Lane, winemaker Jason Moulton frames the case for quality Merlot around fundamentals that apply anywhere the grape is grown well.

"You really do have to start with a great site," says Moulton. "And the farming needs to be just as impeccable as the terroir in order to ensure that all that pure red fruit is balanced with the savory character that has made it such a serious wine elsewhere."

The payoff, he argues, is a wine that fills a real need at the table.

"Really well-balanced Merlot offers a sense of discovery that many consumers and collectors are especially interested in right now," he says.

Steve Matthiasson of Matthiasson Wines echoes Moulton on the primacy of site, adding that the type of "Goldilocks" location Merlot needs to unlock its true potential means it is well-obtained, but not excessively stressful, and cooler than most people assume. When those conditions align, he describes Merlot as the best, offering, "an understated version of Cab like power, but with fruits, flavors, and texture that delivers more of a curves. But a firm curves, not overly soft."

According to Matthiasson, when the site falls short, there's no recovery. "There is nothing that can be done in the cellar to boost up a weak Merlot," he says.

A shift in consumer perception

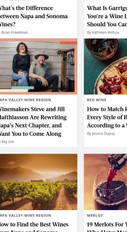
That sentiment resonates with the people on the other side of the transaction. Steven McDonald is a master sommelier and wine director for Pappas Bros. Steakhouse in Houston and Dallas. From the vantage point of an award-winning steakhouse, where guests are often ready to be challenged, he has watched consumer attitudes toward Merlot evolve.

"The biggest misconception about Merlot is that the grape is only capable of making simple wines," he says. "However, when it's grown in the soils and climates that give the best expressions, the wines can be transformative."

McDonald's benchmark list for skeptics includes Château Pétrus, Le Pin, Masseto, and, notably, J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Merlot.

That last inclusion is the kind of validation that suggests the blind tasting Cole sets up in Rutherford may be working on a larger scale than one winery. Merlot's problem was never structural. It was perceptual. The grape has been making the case all along. Drinkers only need to listen.

Trending Shorts



Wirtinger How to Make Neiman Marcus Cake

Cindy's Wash How to Make Goldeo's Potato Salad

Cindy's Wash Best Method for Roasting Vegetab

Explore more: Drinks Wine Red Wine Merlot

Was this page helpful? 👍 👎

Related Articles

CHARDONNAY

The Biggest Misconceptions Behind American Chardonnay vs. French

By Kate Dingwall

WINE REGIONS

What's the Difference Between Cool Climate and Warm Climate Wines?

By Brian Freedman

MERLOT

Merlot — A Guide to the Basics

By Brian Freedman

PINOT NOIR

The 16 Best Pinot Noirs Under $20, According to Wine Experts

By Brian Freedman

NAPA VALLEY WINE REGION

Looking for a Steal in Sonoma Wine? Try Grenache

By Virginie Boone

PINOT GRIGIO (PINOT GRIS)

Not All Pinot Grigio Is Created Equal – Here's How to Find the Good Stuff

By Chasity Cooper

WINE REGIONS

What's the Difference Between Napa and Sonoma Wines?

By Brian Freedman

WINE

What Is Garrigue, and if You're a Wine Lover, Why Should You Care?

By Kathleen Willcox

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

You Can Find Great Cabernet Sauvignon for $25 or Less – if You Know Where to Look

By Lauren Buzzeo

NAPA VALLEY WINE REGION

Winemakers Steve and Jill Matthiasson Are Rewriting Napa's Next Chapter, and Want You to Come Along

By Raj Ubl

RED WINE

How to Match Red Wine With Every Style of Barbecue, According to a Sommelier

By Jessica Dupuy

CHARDONNAY

You Can Find Great Cabernet Sauvignon for $25 or Less – if You Know Where to Look

By Lauren Buzzeo

NAPA VALLEY WINE REGION

How to Find the Best Wines from Napa and Sonoma Valley

By Brian Freedman

MERLOT

19 Merlots For Your Friend Who Hates Merlot

By Brian Freedman

WEST COAST

These Are the 15 New California Wineries You Need to Know in 2025

By Raj Ubl

WINE

Can the Moon Affect How Your Wine Tastes? Many Biodynamic Winemakers Think So

By Jessica Dupuy

WINE

What Is Carbonic Maceration in Winemaking and How Does It Work?

By Kathleen Willcox

Please review our updated Terms of Service.