Merlot

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Merlot's fortunes and image have changed almost unrecognisably over the last few years.

Until quite recently, Merlot seemed consigned to perpetual secondary status, always to be known as 'useful blending partner for Cabernet Sauvignon' because of the role it plays in the wine world's most famous region for fine reds, the Medoc. Merlot has been planted for centuries in Bordeaux's cooler wine regions because it ripens earlier and therefore more reliably than Cabernet Sauvignon - which is why it dominates Pomerol, St-Emilion and even the less celebrated inland vineyards such as those of Entre-Deux-Mers, Bourg and Blaye. If you buy a bottle labelled simply Bordeaux, the odds are that it will be made up mainly of Merlot, tasting remarkably like Cabernet for in this marginal grape-ripening climate, when yields are as high as they are for this, most basic sort of red bordeaux, wines tend to taste simply dry, lightly leafy and aromatic and slightly chewy. (These are NOT wines to be drunk without food!)

You have to go right up the quality scale in red bordeaux to see Merlot in all its French glory. It may be a luscious, mouth-filling, velvety, plummy, intense Pomerol that can often be positively meaty, almost bloody. Or, typically blended with a bit of Cabernet Franc, it may make up the lion's share of a St-Emilion which is similar but is a little leaner and has more of the rich fruit cake, mineral and torrefaction about it. Merlot tends to be noticeably lower in tannins and acidity than Cabernet, which makes it much more voluptuous to taste and, on the palate, provides lots of fruity impact in the middle to fill in the hole left by the tough, tannic framework of young Cabernet Sauvignon.

Outside the remarkably small area represented by the twin appellations of Pomerol and St-Emilion, Merlot used to be rather scorned as a single varietal wine. But, ever since American consumers were introduced to Merlot as a varietal, it has been enjoying a new lease of life. The proposition when California Merlot hit the American market in the early 1990s was basically that this was Cabernet without the pain, a red wine offering the classic nobility of a Bordeaux grape but without the austere tannins. American Merlot's crucial characteristic is not its flavour but its texture which can be, and frequently is, described in one word - smooth. This is a wine to caress the palate, a wine that inspired that great new word in American wine jargon, 'mouthfeel'.

What enabled this of course was the Californian climate. There was no argument, as in Bordeaux, about whether Merlot grapes would ripen fully. The grapes would, in the best examples, be picked as late as possible to achieve full, 'physiological' ripeness, picked not according analyses of their sugar and acid content but by whether the grapes had started to shrivel and their stalks to turn brown and woody. Some of California's finest Merlot producers are Duckhorn, Harrison, Havens, Matanzas Creek, St Francis and Silverado Vineyard, but their wines are in a different stratosphere from the average example which is simply red and sweetish. Merlot has been an undoubted hit with the American public (as witness its phenomenal recent expansion in California's vineyards), even if Californian producers find it so much harder to understand than their beloved Cabernet Sauvignon.

I moderated a conference about Merlot in the Napa Valley not long ago and was struck by how bemused the assembled winemakers were by the success of Merlot. They found it extremely difficult to describe its flavour, perhaps because there was for some time confusion in some Californian nurseries between Merlot and its stablemate Cabernet Franc.

Confusion also reigns in the vineyards that American bottlers turned to when they ran out of Californian Merlot, in Chile. This is the source of some extremely dependable, user-friendly, inexpensive wine labelled Merlot, but it now seems that a significant proportion of vines thought to be Merlot in Chile are actually an old Bordeaux variety called Carmenère. No matter. Carmenère seems to serve to add a nice little kick and spine to Merlot that might otherwise simply be too juicy. Chilean Merlot is rarely as alcoholic and 'thick' as the California prototype, but it often has the appetising aroma of a red bordeaux without being quite as weedy/slight/puny. The most inspiring Merlot producer I have come across in Chile is French-owned Casa Lapostolle, whose Cuvée Alexandre and luxury-priced Clos Apalta bring a Pomerol-like opulence to the precociousness of Chilean Merlot.

Other sources of inexpensive Merlot from which Americans imported fiendishly in the mid-1990s were the Languedoc and north-east Italy, in both of which there are oceans of high-yielding, grassy, light, relatively undistinguished Merlot (seeking a buyer now that California is once more self-sufficient in Merlot, and most other grapes). If there is one distinguishing mark of unambitious Merlot it is a leafy, herbaceous aroma combined with a certain sweetness of fruit.

There are isolated examples of seriously ambitious Merlot in Italy, in the Veneto and notably in Tuscany where it has

turned out some extremely glamorous examples, as well as in Ticino, the southern, Italian-speaking tip of Switzerland.

California is not the only American state in which Merlot plays an important role. Washington state in the far north- +west has virtually built its reputation as a wine producer on its bright, crisp, glossy Merlot, although it now seems to be suffering from a California-like case of Cabernet worship. Andrew Will is the most impressive producer to date.

Elsewhere outside Europe, Merlot is yet to establish a real track record. To me it seems much better suited to the cool climate of New Zealand than Cabernet Sauvignon is, and the wines can be attractively brisk, while Australian Merlots are still all over the place, even if plantings there continue to increase, from a low base. South Africa boasts myriad Merlot producers, although not (yet) a discernibly South African style.

If ever there were a red answer to Chardonnay, Merlot is it. At its best it can be a miraculous, long-living essence of minerality like Chateau Petrus. At its worst, it is simply red and undemanding.