



REVIEW\DECANTER

Give merlot a go

WHEN was the last time you had a glass of merlot? For me, it's been a while. It's picked up an undeserved reputation for all the wrong reasons lately.

It was cruelly bagged by the character Miles in the film *Sideways* a few years ago and it was portrayed (with tongue firmly planted in cheek) as the drink of the rich and famous in the TV series *The OC*.

In fact, I think the last bottle of merlot I bought was when a group of us got together to watch the final episode of that much-underrated TV show. I remember being disappointed by the wine and the series' ending.

Merlot had dropped off my radar as a straight varietal since that night but I've been surprised by the quality of some of the merlot – at all price points – I have tried lately. It's making a comeback in our household – and, hopefully, around Australia, too.

Merlot is one of the six noble grapes (the others are sauvignon blanc, riesling, chardonnay, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon), and it is the most widely planted grape in its home region of Bordeaux.

In fact, in southern France, Italy and Spain, the word “merlot” means “young blackbird”, but it's not known if the name came from the dark-blue colour of the grape when it's ripe or because of the blackbird's fondness for the grapes.

Merlot is used as a straight varietal and as a blender. In blends it's often used in the “Bordeaux blend”, along with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot.

As a straight wine, merlot is a bit of a chameleon and, depending on where it's grown, can be made into different styles: soft, fruit-driven and smooth with few tannins (in America this easy-drinking style is

often referred to as “red chardonnay”); elegant with a more-solid tannic structure and higher acidity; and a gutsy, bold, tannic style made with a similar profile of cabernet sauvignon.

This profile range helps to make merlot handy at the dinner table, too.

The gutsier styles can be matched with foods that traditionally would go well with cabernet sauvignon – lamb and rich vegetable dishes. Softer examples, especially from cooler climates where there is higher acidity, pair well with dishes that suit pinot noir – think mushrooms, risottos and radicchio.

Fruitier, light-bodied styles match well with dishes such as salmon or scallops wrapped in prosciutto.

Areas that seem to be doing merlot well in Australia at the moment are Coonawarra, Canberra, Orange, Adelaide Hills and southern WA.

So, if merlot's been off your radar recently, it's worth more than a sideways glance next time you walk past the merlot aisle at your local bottleshop. \

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THE JAM Merlot plays an important role in blends with cabernet sauvignon. A lot of straight cabernets leave a flavour hole in the middle of the palate, which can be filled in by mixing in some merlot. Think of it as being like a doughnut. The cabernet is the ring around the outside of your tongue and the merlot is the jam in the middle.

TASTINGS\ DRINK THIS

MOUNT AVOCA MERLOT 2008

(Pyrenees) \$25; 13.5% a/v ★★★★★

Food match: Beef tagine with prunes

There's good value to be had in all of the '08 Mount Avoca reds. This example has a touch of cabernet and cabernet franc to add extra complexity, and the typical aromas of red berries, roses, mocha oak, tobacco, muscatels and dried herbs you expect from merlot. There's excellent character in this wine. It's medium-bodied with fruitcake, plum and blackberry flavours and silky, velvet tannins.

KATNOOK ESTATE MERLOT 2008

(Coonawarra) \$40; 13.5% a/v ★★★★★

Food match: Cassoulet

This spent 23 months in oak, 40 per cent of which was new. There is evident mocha oak among complex layers of aromas, which include red fruits, tobacco, sap and roses. It's bright purple-red in colour, medium-bodied with fine-grained tannins and a lovely mouthfeel. Flavours include spicy plum pudding, blackcurrant and dried herbs. There's persistent length, too, and a nice coffee finish.

CAPITAL WINES THE BACKBENCHER MERLOT 2008

(Canberra) \$25; 13.2% a/v ★★★★★½

Food match: Beef Wellington

The back label says: “Merlot has always taken a back seat to more favourable wines”, hence its Backbencher name. This is pushing for a frontbench portfolio. Roses, red berries, mixed spices and leather float up from the glass and draw you back for another cheeky sniff. Generous flavours of fruitcake, blackcurrant, tobacco and mocha oak roll across the tongue like silk, with fine-grained tannins playing a supporting role.

BLUE POLES RESERVE MERLOT 2008

(Margaret River) \$35; 14% a/v ★★★★★½

Food match: Rack of lamb

I really like Blue Poles' wines – they are immaculately made and ooze character. And they are invariably good value. This has complex aromas of raspberry, rose petals, eucalypt, chocolate and a hint of coffee-infused oak. It's medium-bodied, with fine-grained tannins well balanced with flavours of blackberry, plum and tobacco and persistent length. This blossomed after a couple of hours in the decanter.

5★ OUTSTANDING 4★ REALLY GOOD 3★ GOOD 2★ OK 1★ NOT WORTH IT



(THINKSTOCK)



LOVE A BARGAIN? **PENOLA ESTATE MERLOT 2008** (Coonawarra) \$13; 13.5% a/v ★★★★★ *Food match: Pork-and-fennel sausages* This wine is exclusive to Vintage Cellars. It's a fruit-forward wine, both on the nose and on the palate, but at the price it's quite the bargain. This smells of redcurrants, muscatels and coffee, with sappy notes. It's bright purple-red, with flavours of plums, rhubarb and dried herbs, with a faint tannic grip. There's quite a bit of character here, which helps it stand above the pack of sub-\$15 merlots.