

WINES FOR YOUR HONEY

Once-trashed merlots have gotten quite drinkable

In his peripatetic novel, *The English Major*, Jim Harrison nailed down what we need to know about love — this being Love’s month — and wine: “Desire,” he wrote, “is not subject to logic.” We love how — and whom — we love just because we do, dammitall.

This is also a truism of wine. Here, passion is the end-all. Consider what we’re calling “the *Sideways* Effect.” That cult film just celebrated its 10th anniversary, but wine pundits still natter about the results — both positive and negative — of one little scene, in which the character Miles (Paul Giamatti) cracks mos’ snarky, “If anyone orders merlot, I’m leaving.”

Until that line, merlot had been enjoying burgeoning sales, its popularity pumped by its primary qualities: lush fruit with gobs of berry flavors — cherries, blackberries, blueberries, sometimes hints of chocolate — all gently framed by soft tannins, easy to quaff, by itself as a sipper, or with rich foods. Sadly, as Randy Stokes, manager of Sundance Wines, has pointed out, “There was a lot of mediocre merlot being produced,” especially by big California producers. Lately, Stokes continues, “quality has soared.”

The film put into the mouth of a wine-idiot (Miles is undergoing a tutorial in wine, on his way to becoming a pinot-snob) what many wine-savvy folks were thinking about merlots: Wines intended to be fleshy and exciting had instead come to market flabby and dull, over-cropped and over-produced.

The *Sideways* Effect resulted in diminished sales of merlot — and soaring interest in pinot noir. Actually, the *Sideways* Effect turned out to be more chatter — and the source of wine-insiders’ jokes — than substance. However, some vintners made beneficial changes in their treatment of their vines and grapes. Now, 10 years later, there’s a raft of good merlots in the market — and a lingering prejudice against the wine, which tends to drive prices down; some very good merlots are quite affordable for working people. Some of the wines are still the lush, round reds we loved; some are closer to the more structured French style that made merlots among the most sought-after — and expensive — wines in the world. **Chateau Pétrus**, for example, all



merlot, retails currently circa \$900/btl; you can splash your party with a Pétrus 1961 (classic vintage) for a mere \$6,800/btl (eBay).

Imagine: You come to the door, gotcher bundle of roses, yer heart-shaped box o’ chocs (love those shiny red boxes — no reason), dangling Pétrus ’tween yer fingers. Ring the bell. Door opens: “Oh-baby, oh-baby, c’mon in.” Miles ain’t here.

Side note of advice: Do *not* try to match red wines with chocolates; there’s a chemical in wine that, when paired with chocolates, makes the wine taste metallic. But that’s just logic; feel free to riposte, “But I like it.”

Northwest vintners have enjoyed notable successes with merlot, particularly in Washington, especially around Walla Walla; **Leonetti Cellar 2011 Merlot**, hugely popular, carries a \$95 ticket, but a lush **Tamarack Cellars 2011 Merlot** goes home for \$24.50, and Charles Smith’s **Velvet Devil 2013 Merlot** costs only \$12. All are very good, fresh and fruit-driven.

Oregon growers ripen merlot very well in the Rogue Valley; find **RoxyAnn 2009 Merlot** (\$24) or **Cliff Creek Cellars 2010 Merlot** (\$22) for good examples. Some of our vintners also reach toward the Columbia for merlot grapes. Still, many very good merlots wear Oregon labels. Locavores can look to **LaVelle 2010 Merlot** (\$30) for deep, rich fruit, acutely balanced. **Noble Estate 2012 Merlot** (\$29) is still young but silky and promising. The talented winemaker Mark Nicholl offers his **William Rose 2011 Merlot** (\$20) for easy, stylish drinking.

Even Californians are doing better with merlot: a bargain is **Peirano Estate 2011 Lodi “Six Clones” Merlot** (\$15), with lotsa fruit flavor — cherries, dark berries, that hint of chocolate in the finish — yet enough structure to complement good, rich foods. If you’re rolling in dough, spring for Twomey 2008 Merlot (\$50): massive.

If you — or your lover — love merlots, you don’t have to get all *Sideways*, or even say you’re sorry — Wait. No. Wrong. Decent merlot can be drinkable, but it’s still not pinot noir, is it?

Sorry, channeling Miles for a sec. Love what you love, but love it well. Happy Valentine’s Day. ■



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Moonshine Monday - Spend \$50 or more on select strains or extracts, get two grams of Old Time Moonshine.

Tuesday - Buy two grams of Select BHO (for \$45) and get 1/2 gram Absolut BHO.

Humpday - Spend \$50, get a free 1/8 ounce of LA Woman.

Thursday - All medibles 25% off!

Free Joint Friday - Free pre-roll with any purchase. Spend \$50 or more, get two.

Shatterday - \$5 off all extracts on Saturdays.

Other stores say organic. Our organic growers are OCGS members and certified.

NEW PATIENTS (with first purchase)

Free gram of featured strain.

Free hard candy.

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But one 1/8 ounce, get one free
1/8 ounce of LA Woman.

New Swiss Tsunami CBD Strain!

