

The Merlot Factor

Standout bottlings from Napa Valley overperform on quality while holding the line on price



Rocky soils and cooling breezes make Duckhorn's Rector Creek Vineyard one of Napa's top sites for Merlot, yielding a classic-rated version in 2016. (Bob McClenahan)

By [Kim Marcus](#)

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Napa Valley is the heartland for California Cabernet Sauvignon, but with top versions easily surging past \$200 and even \$500 a bottle, the need for a wallet-friendly alternative is plain to see. Fortunately there's a solution at hand: Merlot.

Grown throughout California, Merlot is the fourth most widely planted variety in the state, behind Cabernet, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel, yet nearly all the top bottlings come from Napa Valley. That tracks the performance of Cabernet, though on a much smaller scale, a reflection of the total Napa acreage planted to each variety—less than 5,000 acres of Merlot versus nearly 23,000 acres of Cabernet—as well as the fact that much of the Merlot harvest is used for blending.

Merlot shares many traits with Cabernet Sauvignon. Both grapes are originally from Bordeaux, showing similar genetic parentage, and both yield wines filled with deep, rich and full-bodied dark fruit and spice flavors. But there are differences—Merlot is more plush and fleshier than Cabernet and has been traditionally used as a blending grape to round out Cabernet's harder edges. Yet Merlot can also flourish on its own in California. Well-chosen vineyard sites and attentive winemaking can deliver world-class quality at competitive prices.

Many of the wines I have blind-tasted over the past year are reflective of that equation. Of the nearly 125 California Merlots I have reviewed at our Napa office since my previous report ("[Peaks & Valleys](#)," Nov. 30, 2018), more than 50 achieved outstanding scores of 90 points or higher, including a dozen at 93-plus, dominated by releases from the near-stellar 2016 vintage. (A [free alphabetical list](#) of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

The highest-scorers come from producers with long track records of making Merlot cruise at peak performance. From Duckhorn, which helped pioneer Merlot in California, comes one of the two classic-rated wines in this report, the powerful Rector Creek Vineyard 2016 (95 points, \$100), which features dense, concentrated dark fruit flavors that are well-structured and capped by a long, mineral-filled finish.

Farmed by Duckhorn since the late 1990s, the 35-acre Rector Creek site lies on the east side of the valley at the base of the steep, oak-studded slopes of the Vaca Mountains. Merlot comprises 13.5 acres, planted in three different blocks, and thrives in the vineyard's rocky, gravelly soils, formed by deposits from the creek on gently sloping benchland.

To protect against the strong summer sun, winemaker Renee Ary lets the canopy grow, or "flop," as she calls it, to provide dappled shading to the grapes. This helps avoid the assertive green flavor components that can plague Merlot from too much sun exposure, a problem that can be exacerbated by overcropped sites or unripe fruit. (Merlot is an early-ripening red grape, which adds to its attraction for many growers.)

In addition, Ary notes that cooling breezes often kick up in the afternoon to moderate the summer heat. "What I love about this vineyard is that the tannins are polished, making for a pretty, elegant wine," she says. The Rector Creek also receives 18 months of aging in 75% new French oak barrels, adding to the polish.

Duckhorn, which earned Wine of the Year honors in 2017 for its 2014 Three Palms Merlot, continues to be a juggernaut with the grape. The Rector Creek bottling joins three other Duckhorn Merlots from 2016 to crack 90 points: the Atlas Peak (94, \$78), Three Palms Vineyard (93, \$110) and Napa Valley (90, \$56). "Luxury Merlot is growing nicely in all channels, and Merlot is one of our best-selling varieties after Cabernet," says Carol Reber, who oversees marketing for Duckhorn. "We continue

to see a new generation of wine consumers embrace luxury Merlot, with its elegance and food-worthiness."

Sharing top honors with Duckhorn is the La Jota Merlot Howell Mountain 2016 (95, \$85) from the Jackson Family group of wineries. The grapes come from a rolling mountaintop vineyard ensconced in a dense forest of pines and firs. The site is relatively cool given its altitude, with the grapes maturing slowly, imparting added dimension. Adding to their concentration are the nutrient-low white volcanic and red clay soils that make the vines struggle. The result is fine-edged wine filled with red fruit flavors and a savory richness.

Just a footfall behind in quality is another Jackson release: the Mt. Brave Merlot Mount Veeder 2016 (94, \$80), from a hillside site on the opposite side of the valley from Howell Mountain. It is riper-tasting than the La Jota, with dark plum, dried blackberry and cherry flavors backed by firm tannins.

Another single-vineyard expression of Merlot with plenty of pedigree is the Beringer Howell Mountain Bancroft Ranch Vineyard 2016 (93, \$90), a wine Beringer has been making since 1987. Sourced from a mountaintop site like the La Jota, it has been a standard-bearer for California Merlot from the start. The vineyard, which features white tufa volcanic soils, has temperatures 5° to 10° F cooler than the valley floor, but it enjoys more sunshine because it lies above the morning fog that often blankets lower elevations. The wine is filled with intense red fruit flavors that are burnished and well-structured.

The overall quality of the 2016 vintage is augmented by the year's yield levels, which returned to normal after four years of drought, with restrained tannins. Late-winter rains doused the vineyards and reinvigorated the vines for the growing season, which featured heat early on but then cooled as the harvest approached, resulting in long hang times, complex flavors and firm structures.

Some of the top-rated single-vineyard releases may take some legwork to track down, but happily there are a number of affordable offerings made in sizeable quantities by long-established wineries that should prove easier to find. Look for the Chappellet Napa Valley 2016 (91, \$45), rich, creamy and powerful; The Prisoner Wine Company Napa Valley Thorn 2016 (91, \$45), a big, robust style; Raymond Napa Valley Reserve Selection 2016 (90, \$24), with concentrated red fruit flavors; Sterling Napa Valley 2016 (90, \$30), plush and well-spiced; Beaulieu Vineyard Napa Valley 2016 (89, \$25), with juicy dark fruit flavors; and Rutherford Hill Napa Valley 2015 (89, \$30), offering lively minerality.

Another avenue for Merlot discovery lies in blends led by the grape, either augmented by other Bordeaux varieties (including Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec in addition to Cabernet Sauvignon) or blended in more innovative combinations with Syrah, Zinfandel or Petite Sirah.

These blends are dominated by juicy, well-structured versions that make them go-to options for affordable enjoyment. Leading the way this year are wines such as the Bootleg Napa County 2015 (91, \$38), Calluna CVC Calluna Vineyards Cuvée Chalk Hill 2016 (91, \$33) and Smith & Hook Proprietary Red Wine Blend Central Coast 2015 (91, \$25). Duckhorn is in the hunt as well with its Decoy Red Sonoma County 2016 (89, \$25).

When it comes to big reds from California, put Merlot on your shopping list for delicious flavors at reasonable prices. It's a flavorful alternative, especially from the otherwise pricey precincts of Napa Valley.

Senior editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Merlot.

KIM MARCUS' RECOMMENDED MERLOTS FROM CALIFORNIA

TOP WINES

DUCKHORN

Merlot Napa Valley Rector Creek Vineyard 2016

Score: 95 | \$100

WS Review: This powerful red is filled with dense, concentrated dark currant, plum and dried fig flavors, supported by fresh acidity and firm tannins. Dried savory notes show midpalate, ending with minerally richness.

LA JOTA

Merlot Howell Mountain 2016

Score: 95 | \$85

WS Review: An elegant style, this version features lilting flavors of red currant and dried raspberry that show hints of cedar and paprika. Fine-edged, with savory richness midpalate.

BEHRENS FAMILY

Saint Helen Napa Valley 2015

Score: 94 | \$125

WS Review: Very plush, filled with intense notes of Asian spice to the concentrated dark plum, blackberry and boysenberry flavors. Merlot blend.

DUCKHORN

Merlot Atlas Peak 2016

Score: 94 | \$78

WS Review: Refined, complex and pure-tasting, with plenty of minerality to the red fruit and berry tart flavors. Peppery hints show on the crisp finish.

LEWIS

Merlot Napa Valley 2016

Score: 94 | \$80

WS Review: Big and rich, this version is loaded with chocolate and cocoa power notes to the dark plum and blackberry tart flavors.

MT. BRAVE

Merlot Mount Veeder 2016

Score: 94 | \$80

WS Review: Powerful and brooding, this is full of dark plum, dried blackberry and cherry flavors, with notes of dark olive and savory richness midpalate.

ANTHEM

Merlot Mount Veeder 2016

Score: 93 | \$80

WS Review: Suave and sinewy, featuring hints of pine in the aroma and flavors of dark currant, olive, and dried sage that are fine-meshed and lively.

BERINGER

Merlot Howell Mountain Bancroft Ranch Vineyard Single Vineyard 2016

Score: 93 | \$90

WS Review: This red bursts across the palate with intense red berry and cherry flavors that are burnished and well-structured.

DUCKHORN

Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2016

Score: 93 | \$110

WS Review: Vibrant acidity supports polished flavors of plum tart, dried cherry and dark olive in this version, backed by crisp tannins.

KENZO

Murasaki Napa Valley 2016

Score: 93 | \$280

WS Review: A svelte red, with powerful flavors of dark plum, dried berry, olive and dark currant, supported by grippy tannins. Merlot blend.

LUNA

Merlot Howell Mountain 2016

Score: 93 | \$85

WS Review: This offers concentrated flavors of dark plum, red currant and dried raspberry, with intense minerality on the pure and focused finish.

PAHLMeyer

Merlot Napa Valley 2016

Score: 93 | \$90

WS Review: This hedonistic version features dark plum, kirsch and cherry tart flavors that are lavishly oaky. Shows a plush texture throughout.

CHAPPELLET

Merlot Napa Valley 2015

Score: 92 | \$45

WS Review: Dark plum, blackberry and dark cherry flavors are supported by firm tannins and acidity, with espresso accents on the savory finish.

DARIOUSH

Merlot Napa Valley Signature 2016

Score: 92 | \$60

WS Review: Features toasty notes to the dark cherry and red currant flavors, supported by vibrant acidity. Remains balanced on the finish.

NICKEL & NICKEL

Merlot Oakville Harris Vineyard 2016

Score: 92 | \$65

WS Review: Taut and pure-tasting, with sinewy power to the dried red currant, berry and wild herb flavors that are powered by firm acidity.

PLUMPJACK

Merlot Napa Valley 2016

Score: 92 | \$64

WS Review: Pure and juicy flavors of dark currant, raspberry and cherry pastry are supported by crisp tannins and fresh acidity, with a minerally finish.

TOP VALUES

SMITH & HOOK

Proprietary Red Wine Blend Central Coast 2015

Score: 91 | \$25

WS Review: A big, strapping red, offering ripe dark fruit flavors filled with Asian spice accents, with hot stone notes midpalate and a complex finish.

RAYMOND

Merlot Napa Valley Reserve Selection 2016

Score: 90 | \$24

WS Review: A tensile backbone structures the densely packed dried red fruit and spice flavors. Richly savory midpalate, with suave tannins.

BEAULIEU VINEYARD

Merlot Napa Valley 2016

Score: 89 | \$25

WS Review: Well-sculpted and juicy flavors of crushed dark fruit are framed by chewy tannins in this fleshy style.

DECOY

Red Sonoma County 2016

Score: 89 | \$25

WS Review: Fruity, with rich acidity backing the dried cherry, plum and brambly flavors, showing notes of iodine midpalate. Merlot blend.

GOLDSCHMIDT

Merlot Alexander Valley Chelsea Goldschmidt Guidestone Rise 2017

Score: 89 | \$20

WS Review: Big and ripe, with cherry tart and roasted plum flavors, framed by pencil shaving notes. Hints of dried green herbs show on the finish.

KENWOOD

Merlot Sonoma County 2015

Score: 89 | \$16

WS Review: Broad and finely textured, with forward flavors of raspberry that show dried green elements and hints of licorice. Ends with a supple finish.

RAYMOND

Merlot Napa Valley Reserve Selection 2014

Score: 88 | \$24

WS Review: Peppery notes accent the dried savory spice and red fruit flavors in this sinewy red, which offers hot stone and spice details on the finish.

THE FEDERALIST

Honest Red Blend Mendocino-Napa-Sonoma Counties 2016

Score: 88 | \$18

WS Review: Dried cherry and plum tart flavors are matched to savory notes of wild herbs and spice, with hot stone details on the finish. Merlot blend.

ST. FRANCIS

Merlot Sonoma County 2016

Score: 87 | \$22

WS Review: Roasted plum and dried berry flavors feature sanguine notes in this ripe red. Loamy accents of dried herb show on the finish.

FREI BROTHERS

Merlot Dry Creek Valley Sonoma Reserve 2017

Score: 87 | \$20

WS Review: Hints of tar and slate accent the roasted plum and dried beef flavors, followed by notes of hoisin sauce on the ripe finish.

GOLDSCHMIDT

Fidelity Nick Goldschmidt Alexander Valley 2017

Score: 87 | \$18

WS Review: A fleshy red, showing roasted dark cherry and plum tart flavors filled with jammy accents, with an inky note on the finish. Merlot blend.

EMBRAZEN

Red Blend California 2016

Score: 87 | \$16

WS Review: Roasted plum and cherry tart flavors emerge in this spicy, medium-weight and fruity red, with notes of chocolate mousse. Merlot blend.

HERON

Merlot California 2017

Score: 87 | \$15

WS Review: Fresh and direct, with raspberry and dark currant flavors, this shows savory and mocha notes midpalate, ending with hints of green herbs.

KIRKLAND SIGNATURE

Red Blend Napa Valley 2015

Score: 87 | \$11

WS Review: Dried savory herb notes accent the dried berry and red fruit flavors in this red, which shows tannic grip on the firm finish. Merlot blend.

BOGLE

Merlot California 2016

Score: 86 | \$10

WS Review: This is juicy, featuring graphite accents to the cherry compote and dried berry flavors, followed by a spicy finish, with herbal shadings.