

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

WHO'LL SAVE MERLOT?

WINE REPORT HAVING SURVIVED THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OVEREXPOSURE AND BAD PRESS, IS MERLOT NOW READY FOR A COMEBACK? WINEMAKERS AND SOMMELIERS PONDER THE HOPEFUL FUTURE OF THIS STALWART VARIETAL. JEFFERY LINDENMUTH REPORTS.

In 2006, Jeff Smith, winemaker and owner of Hourglass Vineyards, purchased Blueline, a hillside vineyard north of St. Helena, California, planting it with Merlot. In the wake of the grape's unpopularity, these Merlot vines are one of only 157 acres of Merlot added in California in 2006, a stark contrast to the 3,243 new acres of Pinot Noir that were planted in search of a site that works for Merlot. "Merlot is one of the greatest grapes in the world. When we plant it on alluvial soils, we find Merlot gives us this sour cherry flavor, with brightness and lift along with a spicy element," beams Smith.

Unfortunately, California Merlot proponents like Smith find themselves on the wrong end of the economic equation at a time when it seems easier to sell mediocre Pinot Noir than quality Merlot. Many are quick to blame the 2004 film *Sideways* for ruining Merlot. Stacey Lee Miles for Merlot's downfall, but the film drove the character to such fury. "When *Sideways* came out in the '80s, California Merlot was planted on alluvial soils. Everyone recites that Merlot is not universal. *Sideways* was just the end of the sentence," says Smith.

Brick Loomis, sommelier of Cibo restaurant in Los Angeles, recalls the change in the wine landscape. "What an impact that film had on the sommelier in every restaurant in the country. It was on every table every night for two years."

Smith currently produces both Merlot and Cabernet from Blueline. Typical for Merlot, it demands less money—even from Healdsburg. "There's a glass ceiling for Napa Merlot. The price of Cabernet. Yet, we are not planting Cabernet soils to Merlot, so the investment and passion are

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Hourglass Vineyards' Jeff Smith is a passionate proponent of Merlot.

real," says Smith, noting that such prime viticultural real es-

"We have always wanted it to be a wine that you enjoy with food. We were not immune to the misconceptions about Merlot, but we were persistent." Duckhorn introduced its premium Napa Merlot in the 1980s, and in 1983, with its vineyard Three Palms Vineyard, introduced in 1978, Merlot in every vineyard. In 1983 from a cow-dung, Duckhorn reaffirmed Merlot's ability to utilize all 75 acres of the vineyard. "There will still be a market for Merlot," says Hricik. "But I am not wholly convinced of Merlot."

Jeff Pahlmeyer Winery's Merlot blend and a long-term approach to Merlot is a slave to trends, and that means Merlot is unaffected by the market. The New York disinvestment of their allocation for 2010.

page list abounding with Merlot. Foreign Cinema in San Francisco gives to Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir bill-