



California Merlot Bounces Back

The wines of 2012 offer plush flavors and rich fruit

BY TIM FISH

Life is good if you drink California Merlot. The 2012 vintage is one of the best in years, offering all the qualities that once made this variety so popular—lush texture and gobs of rich, silky fruit.

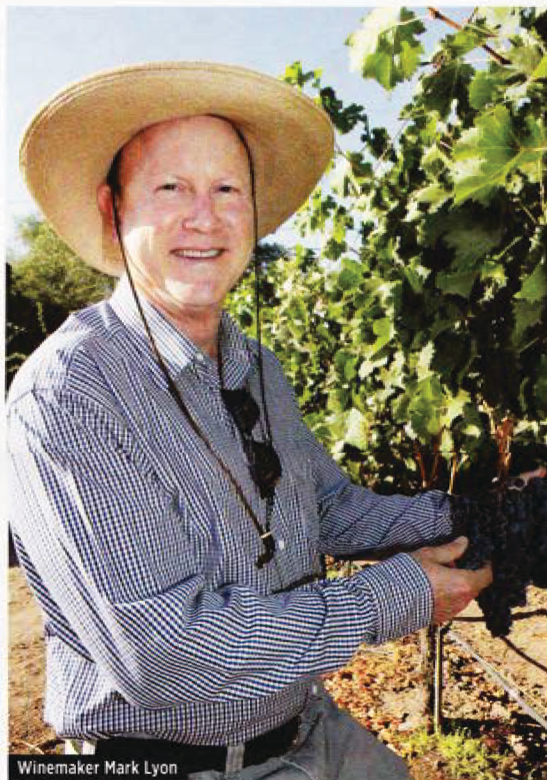
It's a big shift from my last report on the category ("California Merlot Weathers the Storm," Nov. 30, 2014). The 2011 vintage, which dominated the shelves last year, was of decent quality overall, but too many bottlings showed bracing acidity, angular tannins and herbal flavors.

Since then I have blind-tasted more than 150 Merlots in our Napa office. About 32 percent of the 2012s scored an outstanding 90 points or higher on our 100-point scale. In light of that, I give the 2012 vintage a score of 91 points for Napa, the best showing since 2009; Sonoma, with a score of 89 points, gets its best overall rating since 2005. The 2013 Merlots are just beginning to arrive in stores, and though I've tasted only about 40 wines, the vintage shows promise. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/113015.)

It's worth noting that of the top four 2012s, all but the varietal bottling from Robert Foley are Merlot-based blends. Merlot is a challenging grape to grow, and it often lacks structure and has a vegetal character not moderated. The leading 2012s, each at a complex and densely structured 2012 (\$75); the Kapeyard Yountville 2012 the plush Pride Clarence with well-structured mentioned Robert Foley combines a seductive text

The 2012 growing that amped up Merlot's pigmentation with says Sebastiani winemaker Mark Lyon, who owns Alexander Valley vineyard.

The 2013 season was similar, with plenty Lyon, "2013 is a decidedly California fruit-forward vintage for (Leading the pack of early-release 2013s are 91 points, \$85), which show red currant, tomato Valley Blueline Estate rich black cherry, c 2013 harvests were b Goldschmidt Merlot



Winemaker Mark Lyon

"2013 IS A DECIDEDLY CALIFORNIA FRUIT-FORWARD STYLE. IT'S A CABERNET DRINKER'S VINTAGE FOR CALIFORNIA MERLOT."

—Mark Lyon

Goldschmidt 2013 (89, \$19), which is vibrant and appealing, with floral cherry and green tea flavors, and the Pedroncelli Friends Red Sonoma County 2013 (87, \$12), a zesty blend that exhibits notes of black cherry, grilled herb and lead pencil. The St. Francis Merlot Sonoma Valley 2012 (88, \$20) offers focused flavors of red currant, toasty spice and herb, and the Sebastiani Merlot Sonoma County 2012 (88, \$18) packs in notes of black cherry and toasty spice.

There's a trend among the 2013s worth noting. Many of the Merlots in the \$30-and-under category are considerably less ripe than in previous years, perhaps showing the influence of the producers and consumers who have recently been advocating for lower-alcohol wines. The catch is this: If you insist that Merlot have 13.9

TIM FISH'S RECOMMENDED CALIFORNIA MERLOTS

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	SCORE	WINE	PRICE
TOP WINES			TOP WINES (continued)		
92	KENDALL-JACKSON Merlot Bennett Jackson Estate Taylor Peak 2012	\$75	88	ST. FRANCIS Merlot Sonoma Valley 2012	\$20
92	MOONE-TSAI Hillside Blend Howell	\$75	88	TRIG POINT Merlot Alexander Valley Diamond Dust Vineyard 2013	\$18
92	PRIDE Merlot Sonoma County Vineyard	\$75	88	Y3 Taureau Napa Valley 2012	\$20
92	SWITCHBACK RIDGE Merlot Napa Peterson Family Vineyard 2012	\$25	87	PEDRONCELLI Friends Red Sonoma County 2013	\$12
91	ANTHEM Merlot Mount Veeder 2012	\$19			
91	CARTER Hossfeld Coliseum Napa Valley	\$19			
91	CHIMNEY ROCK Elevage Stags Leap	\$19			
91	DUCKHORN Merlot Napa Valley Stag	\$19			
91	FROSTWATCH Merlot Bennett Valley	\$18			
91	91 Hourglass Merlot Napa Valley Blueline Estate 2013	\$75			
91	JEMROSE Merlot Bennett Valley Gloria's Gem 2012	\$75			
91	NEYERS Merlot Napa Valley Neyers Ranch-Conn Valley 2013	\$30			
91	REALM The Tempest Napa Valley 2012	\$85			

"Hourglass... The Hourglass Merlot Napa Valley Blueline Estate 2013 (91, \$75) has a dense core layered with rich black cherry, olive, and licorice fruit"

91 Hourglass Merlot Napa Valley Blueline Estate 2013 \$75 Focused and sleek, with aromas of red currant and tomato leaf leading to elegantly complex flavors of plush cherry, mocha and spice. Tannins sneak in on the finish. Drink now through 2021. 1,100 cases made.—T.F.



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