

# **Merlot**

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## Merlot Profile

**Grape (Vitis):**

Colour berry skin: Black

Also called: Picard, Langon

**Notable regions:** Bordeaux, Long Island, Napa Valley, Sonoma

County, Chilean Central Valley,

Australia

**Notable wines:** Saint-Émilion, Pomerol

**Ideal soil:** Clay

**Wine characteristics**

**General:** Medium tannins

**Cool climate:** Strawberry, red berry, plum, cedar, tobacco

**Medium climate:** Blackberry, black plum, black cherry

**Hot climate:** Fruitcake, chocolate

## What is Merlot?

(WinePair and Wikipedia)

**Merlot** is a dark blue-colored wine grape variety, that is used as both a blending grape and varietal wines. The name *Merlot* is thought to be a diminutive of *merle*, the French name for the blackbird, probably a reference to the color of the grape. Its softness and "fleshiness", combined with its earlier ripening, makes Merlot a popular grape for blending with the sterner, later-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon, which tends to be higher in tannin.

Along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot, Merlot is one of the primary grapes used in Bordeaux wine, and it is the most widely planted grape in the Bordeaux wine regions. Merlot is also one of the most popular red wine varietals in many markets. This flexibility has helped to make it one of the world's most planted grape varieties. As of 2004, Merlot was estimated to be the third most grown variety at 260,000 hectares globally, with an increasing trend. This puts Merlot just behind Cabernet Sauvignon's 262,000 hectares.

It is believed that the first time the grape was used in making wine was in the late 1700s when a French winemaker in the Bordeaux region formally labeled the grape as an ingredient in his Bordeaux wine blend. From this moment on, the grape spread across Bordeaux and became known for its unique ability to add softness and luscious fruit to a wine when it was combined with the region's favorite grape, Cabernet Sauvignon. The combination of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot complemented each other so well, that the pair became the main ingredients for the world-renowned Bordeaux blend, now coveted by the majority of the world's wine drinkers.

As the popularity of Bordeaux wine spread across the globe, so too did Merlot. When the grape arrived in California in the mid-nineteenth century, instead of being blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, American winemakers began making wines using 100% Merlot. The grape grew easily and they discovered Americans really loved the softness of the fruit on its own, and that they enjoyed its low tannin levels.

While Merlot is made across the globe, there tends to be two main styles. The "International style" favored by many New World wine regions tends to emphasize late harvesting to gain physiological ripeness and produce inky, purple colored wines that are full in body with high alcohol and lush, velvety tannins with intense, plum and blackberry fruit. While this international style is practiced by many Bordeaux wine producers, the traditional "Bordeaux style" of Merlot involves harvesting Merlot earlier to maintain acidity and producing more medium-bodied wines with moderate alcohol levels that have fresh, red fruit flavors (raspberries, strawberries) and potentially leafy, vegetal notes. Merlot is a varietal can yield at least 13.5% alcohol, but can approach 14.5%, especially when it is grown in a warmer climate such as Australia, California or Chile. The wine is often said to have a plummy taste and notes of chocolate. It's also considered to be smooth and very

easy to drink.

## **Merlot Wines**

As a varietal wine, Merlot can make soft, velvety wines with plum flavors. While Merlot wines tend to mature faster than Cabernet Sauvignon, some examples can continue to develop in the bottle for decades. There are three main styles of Merlot — a soft, fruity, smooth wine with very little tannins, a fruity wine with more tannic structure and, finally, a brawny, highly tannic style made in the profile of Cabernet Sauvignon. Some of the fruit notes commonly associated with Merlot include cassis, black and red cherries, blackberry, blueberry, boysenberry, mulberry, ollalie berry and plum. Vegetable and earthy notes include black and green olives, cola nut, bell pepper, fennel, humus, leather, mushrooms, rhubarb and tobacco. Floral and herbal notes commonly associated with Merlot include green and black tea, eucalyptus, laurel, mint, oregano, pine, rosemary, sage, sarsaparilla and thyme. When Merlot has spent significant time in oak, the wine may show notes of caramel, chocolate, coconut, coffee bean, dill weed, mocha, molasses, smoke, vanilla and walnut.

## **White Merlot**

White Merlot is made the same way as White Zinfandel. The grapes are crushed, and after very brief skin contact, the resulting pink juice is run off the must and is then fermented. It normally has a hint of raspberry. White Merlot was reputedly first marketed in the late 1990s. In Switzerland, a type of White Merlot is made in the Ticino region but has been considered more a rosé.

White Merlot should not be confused with the grape variety Merlot blanc, which is a cross between Merlot and Folle blanche that was discovered in 1891, nor should it be confused with the white mutant variety of the Merlot grape.

## **Food Pairing**

In food and wine pairings, the diversity of Merlot can lend itself to a wide array of matching options. Cabernet-like Merlots pair well with many of the same things that Cabernet Sauvignon would pair well with, such as grilled and charred meats. Softer, fruitier Merlots (particularly those with higher acidity from cooler climate regions like Washington State and Northeastern Italy) share many of the same food-pairing affinities with Pinot noir and go well with dishes like salmon, mushroom-based dishes and greens like chard and radicchio. Light-bodied Merlots can go well with shellfish like prawns or scallops, especially if wrapped in a protein-rich food such as bacon or prosciutto. Merlot tends not to go well with strong and blue-veined cheeses that can overwhelm the fruit flavors of the wine. The capsaicin of spicy foods can accentuate the perception of alcohol in Merlot and make it taste more tannic and bitter.

## **The Differences Between Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon**

VinePair

Merlot and Cabernet, they're the two most popular red wines and to help people understand what makes each of them different and unique, following is a brief summary of their main attributes.

Both of these wines are great with food, especially meat, but each has its own set of characteristics, and it's these differences that actually make the wines perfect for blending together, as is done when making Bordeaux, because when combined their individual traits support one another in a really delicious way.

Both Merlot and Cabernet were born in Bordeaux, France and they quickly came to dominate the famous wine region, though depending on what side of the Gironde river you live on, you're more likely to grow more Cabernet or more Merlot. Here's an oversimplification of how it all started: When the grapes first began to be grown, people on the left bank of the river felt their land was better suited for growing Cabernet, so it became the dominant grape in their crop. That then translated into Cabernet becoming the dominant grape in their Bordeaux blends, and thus resulted in the creation of "left bank" Bordeaux. The vintners living on the right bank felt their land was better suited for Merlot, so that's the grape they grew more of, and made dominant when they made Bordeaux, thus creating "right bank" Bordeaux. So, if you find you're more a fan of Cabernet or Merlot, just ask your wine shop for their left or right bank Bordeaux, respectively.

There are reasons to love both Merlot and Cabernet, but ask a winemaker in Bordeaux and they will clearly prefer one to the other, usually depending on where they grow their wine!

Merlot is the more soft and supple of the two grapes. It's often described as juicy with flavors of chocolate and cherry, and we find it absolutely delicious alongside a cheeseburger or steak frites. Merlot is considered more of a crowd pleasing or "easy drinking" wine because of these characteristics, and in a blend where it's the dominant grape, it's soft fruit flavors cause the wine to taste great at a much younger age, which is a reason winemakers love it.

Cabernet Sauvignon on the other hand is the older and more aggressive sibling. The grape is much more tannic, meaning it will give your mouth that drying sensation, and it's often said to have a strong "backbone" which is just another way of saying it's hearty and powerful, capable of standing up to rich dishes such as a porterhouse or braised short ribs. Cabernet is a grape that is extremely age-worthy and often winemakers will say wines made using the grape need more time to age in the bottle before being opened because when young the wine's tannins can be very aggressive. Another way to soften the flavors if the tannins are too strong is by decanting the wine for about thirty minutes, letting oxygen mellow everything out. No one grape is better than the other, they're just different, but it's what makes them unique that also make them absolutely delicious, and extremely popular.

## **History and Name**

The earliest recorded mention of Merlot (under the synonym of *Merlau*) was in the notes of a local Bordeaux official who in 1784 labeled wine made from the grape in the Libournais region as one of the area's best. In 1824, the word *Merlot* itself appeared in an article on Médoc wine where it was described that the grape was named after the local black bird (called *Merlau* in the local Occitan language) on one of the islands found along the Garonne river. By the 19th century it was being regularly planted in the Medoc on the "Left Bank" of the Gironde. It was first recorded in Italy around Venice under the synonym *Brood* in 1855. The grape was introduced to the Swiss, from Bordeaux, sometime in the 19th century and was recorded in the Swiss canton of Ticino between 1905 and 1910. In the 1990s, Merlot saw an upswing of popularity in the United States. Red wine consumption, in general, increased in the US following the airing of the *60 Minutes* report on the French Paradox and the potential health benefits of wine and, possibly, the chemical reservation.

### **Parentage and relationship to other grapes**

In the late 1990s, researchers at University of California, Davis showed that Merlot is an offspring of Cabernet Franc and is a half-sibling of Carmenere, Mable and Cabernet Sauvignon. The identity of the second parent of Merlot wouldn't be discovered till the late 2000s when an obscure and unnamed variety, first sampled in 1996 from vines growing in an abandoned vineyard in Saint-Silica in Brittany, was shown by DNA analysis to be the mother of Merlot. This grape, later discovered in front of houses as a decorative vine in the villages as *Madeleine* or *Raisin de La Madeleine* due to its propensity to be fully ripe and ready for harvest around the July 22nd feast day of Mary Magdalene

Over the years, Merlot has spawned a color mutation that is used commercially, a pink-skinned variety known as *Merlot gris*. However, unlike the relationship between Grenache noir and Grenache blanc or Pinot noir and Pinot blanc, the variety known as Merlot blanc is not a color mutation but rather an offspring variety of Merlot crossing with Folly blanche.

Merlot grapes are identified by their loose bunches of large berries. The color has less of a blue/black hue than Cabernet Sauvignon grapes and with a thinner skin and fewer tannins per unit volume. It normally ripens up to two weeks earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon. Also compared to Cabernet, Merlot grapes tend to have a higher sugar content and lower malice acid. Merlot thrives in cold soil, particularly ferrous clay. The age of the vine is also important, with older vines contributing character to the resulting wine.

A characteristic of the Merlot grape is the propensity to quickly overripe once it hits its initial ripeness level, sometimes in a matter of a few days. There are two schools of thought on the right time to harvest Merlot. The wine makers of Chateau Pétrus favor early picking to best maintain the wine's acidity and finesse as well as its potential for aging. Others, such as Rolland, favor late picking and the added fruit

body that comes with a little bit of over-ripeness.

## **Wine regions**

Merlot is one of the world's most widely planted grape variety with plantings of the vine outpacing even the more well-known Cabernet Sauvignon in many regions, including the grape's homeland of France. Here, France is home to nearly two thirds of the world's total plantings of Merlot. Beyond France it is also grown in Italy (where it is the country's 5th most planted grape), Algeria, California, Romania, Australia, Argentina, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Greece, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, Slovenia, Mexico and other parts of the United States such as Washington, Virginia and Long Island. It grows in many regions that also grow Cabernet Sauvignon but tends to be cultivated in the cooler portions of those areas. In areas that are too warm, Merlot will ripen too early.

## **France**

Merlot is the most commonly grown grape variety in France. In 2004, total French plantations stood at 115,000 hectares. By 2009, that number had risen slightly to 115,746 hectares. It is most prominent in Southwest France in regions like Bordeaux, Bergerac and Chais where it is often blended with Malbec. The largest recent increase in Merlot plantations has occurred in the south of France, such as Languedoc-Roussillon, where it is often made under the designation of *Vin de Pays* wine. Here, Merlot accounted for 29,914 hectares, more than doubling the 11,000 hectares devoted to Cabernet Sauvignon in the Languedoc.

In the traditional Bordeaux blend, Merlot's role is to add body and softness. Despite accounting for 50-60% of overall plantings in Bordeaux, the grape tends to account for an average of 25% of the blends — especially in the Bordeaux wine regions of Graves and Medoc. Of these Left Bank regions, the commune of St-Stephen uses the highest percentage of Merlot in the blends. However, Merlot is much more prominent on the Right Bank of the Gironde in the regions of Pomerol and Saint-Émilion, where it will commonly comprise the majority of the blend. One of the most famous and rare wines in the world, Château Pétrus, is almost all Merlot. In Pomerol, where Merlot usually accounts for around 80% of the blend, the iron-clay soils of the region give Merlot more of a tannic backbone than what is found in other Bordeaux regions. It was in Pomerol that the *garagistes* movement began with small-scale production of highly sought-after Merlot-based wines. In the sandy, clay-limestone-based soils of Saint-Émilion, Merlot accounts for around 60% of the blend and is usually blended with Cabernet Franc. In limestone, Merlot tends to develop more perfume notes while in sandy soils the wines are generally softer than Merlot grown in clay dominant soils. Merlot can also be found in significant quantities in Provence, Loire Valley, Savoie, Ardèche, Charente, Corrèze, Drôme, Isère and Vienne.

## **Italy**

In Italy, there were 25,614 hectares of the grape planted in 2000 with more than two-thirds of Italian Merlot being used in *Indicazione geografica tipica* (IGT) blends (such as the so-called "Super Tuscans") versus being used in classified *Denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC). A large portion of Merlot is planted in the Friuli wine region where it is made as a varietal or sometimes blended with Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc. In other parts of Italy, such as the Maremma coast in Tuscany, it is often blended with Sangiovese to give the wine a similar softening effect as the Bordeaux blends. Italian Merlots are often characterized by their light bodies and herbal notes. Merlot's low acidity serves as a balance for the higher acidity in many Italian wine grapes with the grape often being used in blends in the Veneto, Alto Adige and Umbria.

### **Spain and Portugal**

In the hot continental climate of many of Spain's major wine region, Merlot is less valued than it is in the damp maritime climate of Bordeaux or the warm Mediterranean climate of the Tuscan coast. But as the popularity of international varieties continue to grow on the world wine market, Spanish wine producers have been experimenting with the variety with even winemakers in Rioja petitioning authorities to allow Merlot to be a permitted grape to be blended with Tempranillo in the red wines of the region. In 2008, there were 13,325 hectares of Merlot, a significant increase from the 8,700 hectares that were being cultivated in the country only 4 years earlier. The largest concentration of the grape is in the Mediterranean climate of Catalunya with 3,360 hectares in 2008 with the grape also showing some potential in the cooler-climate wine region of Conca de Barberà in Tarragona. In Costers del Segre, the grape is often used in Bordeaux-style blend while in Aragon Navarra and Castilla-La Mancha also blending with Tempranillo and other local Spanish wine grape varieties. Spain's neighbor on the Iberian peninsula, Portugal, has only a very limited amount of Merlot compared to the abundance of native Portuguese grape varieties.

### **Rest of Western Europe**

**In Germany**, there were 450 hectares of Merlot growing in 2008 with the grape mostly planted in the warmer German wine regions of the Palatinate and Rheinhessen.

**In Switzerland**, Merlot accounts for nearly 85% of the wine production in Ticino where it is often made in a pale "white Merlot" style. In 2009, there were 1,028 hectares plantings of Swiss Merlot.

Plantings of Merlot have increased in recent years in the Austrian wine region of Burgenland where vineyards previously growing Welschriesling are being uprooted to make room for more plantings. The grape still lags behind its parent variety, Cabernet Franc, with 112 hectares in cultivation in 2008. Outside of Burgenland, nearly half of all Austrian Merlot plantings are found in Lower Austria.

## **Central and Eastern Europe**

In the Central European countries of Bulgaria, Moldova, Croatia and Romania, Merlot is often produced as a full-bodied wine that can be very similar to Cabernet Sauvignon. In Bulgaria, plantings of Merlot, with 15,202 hectares in 2009, Romania with 10,782 hectares and Moldova with 8,123, account for the bulk of this varietal planting of the rest of central and eastern Europe 40,000 hectares under this varietal. In Romania, Merlot is the most widely exported red wine grape variety in cultivation in 2008.

## **North America**

Merlot is grown across the United States with California and Washington growing the most. Other regions producing Merlot include New York State with 365 hectares in 2006 with most of it in the maritime climate of the Long Island AVA and multiple regions in Ohio. In Texas, Merlot is the second most widely planted red wine grape after Cabernet Sauvignon with 117 hectares. In Virginia, the grape was the most widely planted red variety with 136 hectares in 2010, most of it in the Monticello AVA and Shenandoah Valley AVA, while Oregon had 206 hectares in 2008 with most planted in the Rogue Valley AVA.

## **California**

In the early history of California wine, Merlot was used primarily as a 100% varietal wine until winemaker Warren Winiarski encouraged taking the grape back to its blending roots with Bordeaux style blends. Sales of Merlot spiked with the grape hitting its peak plantings of over 20,640 hectares in 2004. By 2010, plantings of California Merlot had dropped slightly to 18,924 hectares.

In California, Merlot can range from very fruity simple wines (sometimes referred to by critics as a "red Chardonnay") to more serious, barrel aged examples. It can also be used as a primary component in Meritage blends.

While Merlot is grown throughout the state, it is particularly prominent in Napa, Monterey and Sonoma County. In Napa, examples from Los Carneros, Mount Veeder, Oakville and Rutherford tend to show ripe blackberry and black raspberry notes. Sonoma Merlots from Alexander Valley, Carneros and Dry Creek Valley tend to show plum, tea leaf and black cherry notes.

## **Washington State**

In the 1980s, Merlot helped put the Washington wine industry on the world's wine map. Prior to this period there was a general perception that the climate of Washington State was too cold to produce red wine varietals. Merlots from Leonetti Cellar, Andrew Will, Columbia Crest and Chateau Ste. Michelle demonstrated that areas of the Eastern Washington were warm enough for red wine production. Today it is the second most widely grown red wine grape in the state (after Cabernet Sauvignon), following many years of being the most widely planted variety, and

accounts for nearly one fifth of the state's entire production. In 2011, there were 3,334 hectares of Washington Merlot in cultivation. It is widely planted throughout the Columbia Valley AVA but has earned particular notice from plantings grown in Walla Walla, Red Mountain and the Horse Heaven Hills. Washington Merlots are noted for their deep color and balanced acidity. The state's climate lends itself towards long days and hours of sunshine with cool nights that contributes to a significant diurnal temperature variation and produces wines with New World fruitiness and Old World structure.

## **Canada and Mexico**

**In Canada**, Merlot can be found across the country from Ontario, where there were 498 hectares (of the grape in 2008), to British Columbia, where the grape is the most widely planted wine grape variety of either color at 641 hectares (1,580 acres). Here Merlot accounts for almost a third of all red wine grape plantings and is used for both varietal and Bordeaux-style blends.

**In Mexico**, Merlot is cultivated primarily in the Valle de Guadalupe of Baja California, the country's main wine-producing area. Plantings have increased substantially since the 1980s, and cultivation has spread into the nearby areas of Ojos Negros and Santo Tomás. The grape can also be found in the northeastern Mexican wine region of Coahuila, across the border from Texas.

## **South America**

**In Chile**, Merlot thrives in the Apalta region of Colchagua Province. It is also grown in significant quantities in Curicó, Casablanca and the Maipo Valley. Until the early 1990s, the Chilean wine industry mistakenly sold a large quantity of wine made from the Carménère grape as Merlot. . While the vines, leaves and grapes look very similar, both grapes produce wines with distinct characteristics — Carménère being more strongly flavored with green pepper notes and Merlot having softer fruit with chocolate notes.

Today, "true" Merlot is the third most widely planted grape variety in Chile after Cabernet Sauvignon and Listán Prieto with 13,280 hectares in 2009. Most of these planting are in the Central Valley with Colchagua leading the way with 3,359 hectares followed by Maule Valley with 3,019 hectares and Curicó with 2,911 hectares.

**In Argentina**, Merlot plantings have been increasing in the Mendoza region with the grape showing an affinity to the Tupungato region of the Uco Valley. Argentine Merlots grown in the higher elevations of Tunpungato have shown a balance of ripe fruit, tannic structure and acidity. The grape is not as widely planted here due to the natural fruity and fleshiness of the popular Malbec and Douce noir/Bonarda grapes that often don't need to be "mellowed" by Merlot as Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc may benefit from. In 2008, there were 7,142 hectares of Merlot growing in Argentina, most of it in the Mendoza region and in the San Juan Province.

**In Uruguay**, Merlot is often blended with Tannat and is the 2nd most widely planted red grape variety, representing around 10% of total vineyard plantings. More widely planted than Cabernet Sauvignon, there were 853 hectares of the grape in cultivation in 2009. **Brazil** is home to 1,089 hectares of Merlot (as of 2007) with most of them in the Rio Grande do Sul region that is across the border with Uruguay. Other South American wine regions growing Merlot include **Bolivia and Peru**.

### **Oceania, South Africa and Asia**

**In New Zealand**, plantings of Merlot have increased in the Hawke's Bay region, particularly in Gimblett Gravels where the grape has shown the ability to produce Bordeaux-style wine. The grape has been growing in favor among New Zealand producers due to its ability to ripen better, with less green flavors, than Cabernet Sauvignon. Other regions with significant plantings include Auckland, Marlborough and Martinborough. In 2008, Merlot was the second most widely red grape variety (after Pinot noir) in New Zealand and accounted for nearly 5% of all the country's plantings with 1,363 hectares (3,370 acres) in cultivation.

**In Australia**, some vineyards labeled as "Merlot" were discovered to actually be Cabernet Franc. Merlot vines can also be found growing in the Barossa Valley, McLaren Vale and Wrattobully in South Australia. In 2008, it was the third most widely planted red grape variety after Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon with 10,537 hectares (26,040 acres). As in California, the global "Merlot craze" spurred an increase of plantings, most of it in the warm, irrigated regions of Murray Darling, Riverina and Riverland where the grape variety could be mass-produced. Recent plantings, such as those in the Margaret River area of Western Australia have been focusing on making more Bordeaux-style blends.

**In South Africa**, plantings of Merlot have focused on cooler sites within the Paarl and Stellenbosch regions. Here the grape is the third most widely planted red grape variety, accounting for nearly 15% of all red wine grape plantings, with 6,614 hectares (16,340 acres) of Merlot in cultivation in 2008. The majority of these plantings are found in the Stellenbosch region with 2,105 hectares and Paarl with 1,289 hectares. According to wine expert Jancis Robinson, South African Merlot tends to be made as a varietal in a "chocolate, glossy California style".

**In Asia**, Merlot is planted in emerging wine regions in India. It can also be found in Japan with 816 hectares in 2009 and in China with 3,204 hectares.