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## A Love Letter To Merlot



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Spirits

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*No longer maligned, Merlot is a wine to fall in love with*



Wear your Merlot heart on your sleeve. LBORTOLOTT

**Say Merlot to wine drinkers** and you're likely to get one of two reactions: an eye roll or an appreciative sigh. The former is a hangover from the 2004 movie, "Sideways" in which the main character, a depressed wine snob with a failed career and marriage, famously derided the wine, while simultaneously exalting Pinot Noir. The so-called "Sideways Effect," as reported in a [2009 study](#) in the *Journal of Wine Economics*, was linked to a 2% drop in sales for three consecutive years following the film, while sales of the film's more favorable grape star rose 16%.

But the protagonist's declaration was not exactly heard like a shot around the world.

"The contemptuous words uttered by a fictional character struggling with an [anxiety disorder] and under Xanax had no repercussions outside the U.S.," says Max de Zarobe of [Avignonesi Wines](#), Tuscan producers of the "Desiderio" Merlot. "In Europe, Merlot remains one of the most valued grapes."

*Allora!* Enter the appreciative sigh, which comes from lovers of the noble grape whose references harken not to a movie, but to the great châteaux such as Lafleur, Le Pin, Pétrus and Angélu in Pomerol—arguably the grape's spiritual home.

"There seems to be kind of a gap where it feels like there are two drinkers of Merlot and they're at the extremes," says sommelier Kelli White, director of education at The Wine Center at [Meadowood](#), and author of *Napa Valley Then & Now*. "There are the people who say Merlot is not cool and they may not choose to revisit that, and then there are the super knowledgeable [drinkers] who think Merlot is absolutely amazing and delicious."

Long relegated to the role of a blending grape with other Bordeaux varieties—Cabernet Sauvignon in particular—Merlot on its own has historic roots in California and Washington State, and it is especially successful in Italy, anchoring many of the premium Super Tuscan wines. Stateside, the grape gained popularity in the 1990s, sparked in part by *60 Minutes*' "French Paradox" report in 1991, leading to over planting in many areas just to keep up with demand. When *Sideways*' antihero disparaged the grape, some say he wasn't wrong.

"Merlot got very popular and people were planting it everywhere with high tonnage and the quality did drop in some," says David "Merf" Merfeld, who makes the "Premier" Merlot at **Northstar Winery** in Washington's Columbia Valley. "But that worked itself out, so that was one good upshot of the movie."

In addition to his own circle of peers who see Merlot's second coming, Merfeld noted "sommeliers are starting to come back to it and realize the quality potential."

"Things come back around in fashion and it's Merlot's time," he said.

While Valentine's Day is a good time to give some love to Merlot, here are seven producers who do that all year 'round.



Washington State is a standard bearer for quality Merlot in the U.S. PRODUCERS

**Abeja Columbia Valley Merlot, 2019.** Winemaker Dan Wampfler has been working with Merlot his entire career, saying it is intrinsically suited to Washington's growing conditions. "Merlot [here] tends to be on the more fruit side than the earthy styles in Europe. But that's not to say there aren't nuances you can get out of terroir." He stands by the grape, saying they don't let a movie or a trend determine what they want to make or drink.

**Notes:** Ripe red fruits—red plum, wild strawberry—partner up with tart cranberries in this happy wine. Well integrated tannins and a dusting of mocha add a pleasant note of interest. Everything in the mouth is elevated by a bright cedar note and the wine finishes long and memorably. \$50