

THE WASHINGTON PANEL

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Role Model

*A Vintner of Many Talents,
Carolyn Wentz Is Second to None
When It Comes to Running
a Family Wine Empire*

The Blackbird Flies Again!

ONCE-MALIGNED MERLOT TAKES OFF

by Ben Weinberg

Merlot's name is thought to derive from the Old French word for young blackbird. That probably referred to the color of the grape's skin, but Merlot is certainly taking flight these days.

Merlots that show character, complexity and, above all, balance, have had a serious vinous revival since the not-too-distant days when "Cabernet without the pain" got sneers from wine snobs. Today, it seems, there are three main styles of Merlot—in other words, something for everyone. Some are soft, fruity and smooth with very little tannin; think early-drinking. Some are somewhat fruity with more tannic and acid structure—great food wines. Others are brawny and highly structured, with serious aging potential for collectors. Regardless of style, adaptable, friendly Merlot deserves a place on your customer's table and on your retail shelf.



Other Outstanding Releases



Tin Roof 2009 Merlot, California (\$10) This is red-brown in color with a nose of red cherry and fresh blood. Strawberry liqueur, cinnamon and cedar round out this inexpensive quaffer.

O'NEILL VINTNERS & DISTILLERS



Bulletin Place 2010 Merlot, South Eastern Australia (\$11) Firm in texture and light on its feet, with dark berry and wet hay flavors that don't fade prematurely. Very nicely priced, too.

VINEYARD BRANDS



Fairview 2010 La Capra Merlot, Coastal Region, South Africa (\$12) Cuddly rhubarb and plums lead off this bright wine's aromatics, while toasted bread and mint linger on the moderate finish.

VINEYARD BRANDS



Red Rock Winery 2009 Reserve Merlot, California (\$12) Tinted a dark red, this substantial wine smells of blueberry and charcoal and tastes of cola and blackberry. Lingers nicely on the tongue and isn't at all expensive.

E&J GALLO



Lapostolle 2010 Casa Merlot, Rapel Valley, Chile (\$15) Purple-red in hue with a nose of camphor and blackberry. The palate is all about blueberries and dark chocolate, and the finish is warm and long.

TERLATO WINES INTERNATIONAL



Ancient Peaks 2010 Merlot, Paso Robles (\$19) Colored a fluorescent red, this smells of cranberry, dark chocolate and tree bark. A lovely kirsch layer lies on the tongue, followed by mocha and juicy red cherry.



Blackbird Vineyards 2009 Illustration, Napa Valley (\$125) A bright and tangy Merlot-driven blend with concentrated plum, dark chocolate and berry fruit; supple, dense and nicely structured with complexity and power; great aging potential.



Robert Mondavi 2009 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$23) A soft yet lively red, with black cherry and tomato leaf aromas and focused currant and spiced cedar flavors.

CONSTELLATION WINES U.S.



Roth 2010 Merlot, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County (\$23) Red-purple in the glass with a nose of currant and strawberry. On the tongue this luscious beauty screams creamy black cherry and dark chocolate and finishes high and long.

WILSON DANIELS



Buena Vista Winery 2009 Merlot, Carneros (\$25) From its innovative beginnings under zealous founder Count Agoston Haraszthy to its historic rebirth under owner Jean-Charles Boisset and chief winemaker Brian Maloney, Buena Vista has always produced stylistically diverse wines using many varieties (see p. 110 for the full story). This Carneros Merlot is a red-black concoction that boasts aromas of pomegranate and black licorice alongside flavors of rose and blood sausage.

BOISSET FAMILY ESTATES



Freemark Abbey 2010 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$34) Aromas of green herb, cherry and currant are joined by cedary oak, lead pencil and pencil shavings, giving it an austere edge and ending with dry, herbal tannins.

JACKSON FAMILY WINES



Shafer Vineyards 2009 Merlot, Napa Valley (\$47) This is an attractive, fleshy wine graced with expressive dark red fruit, flowers, sweet spices and licorice. It reveals gorgeous radiance and a supple, inviting personality.



Northstar 2008 Merlot, Walla Walla, Columbia Valley (\$50) Dark red in color, this smells of blood, smoke and cinnamon and tastes of black cherry and raspberry. A whopper of a wine.

STE. MICHELLE WINE ESTATES