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9 Winning California Merlots

New reviews of Golden State reds that raise the bar on quality

Tim Fish

Posted: June 17, 2013

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

California Merlot is known for its soft and supple flavors. But, as this selection of new releases shows, the grape can produce the structure and backbone of Cabernet Sauvignon while still retaining a uniquely rich texture.

This is especially true with Merlots from 2010, a challenging year for the variety. Spring was unusually rainy, and summer cold and cloudy, causing problems with mildew and botrytis. In late August, the sun and heat arrived with a vengeance, followed by a massive storm in October.

As a result, the quality of the Merlot crop varied wildly. Most of the wines show vibrant acidity and no shortage of tannins, while the best still feature enough fruit to keep everything balanced. Still, a few examples are hard and chewy, or display herbal and vegetal notes.

You'll note that Napa dominates this list. Merlot, just like Cabernet Sauvignon, seems to thrive there. Barring bottlings from Buena Vista and Charles Krug, however, the wines come at a premium.

I'll keep tasting new-release 2010s, and even some early-arriving 2011s. Watch for my annual Merlot report this fall.

CELANI FAMILY Tenacious Napa Valley 2010

Score: 92 / \$60

Impressively focused and structured, this offers mixed berry and mineral aromas and rich yet dense flavors of blueberry, dusty mocha and cedar. Hands off for now. Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Best after 2015. 1,600 cases made. —T.F.

PLUMPJACK Merlot Napa Valley 2010 Score: 92 / \$52

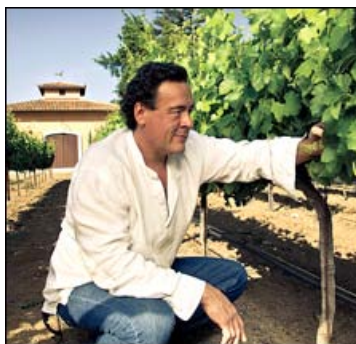
Plush and supple, with red currant and toasty vanilla aromas and layered black cherry, mocha and tomato leaf flavors that linger. Drink now through 2019. 3,300 cases made. —T.F.

BEHRENS FAMILY The Collector Napa Valley 2009

Score: 91 / \$60

Distinctive and rich, with explosive aromas of espresso and black cherry, offering layered currant, toasty oak and Asian spice flavors. Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Syrah and Tempranillo. Drink now through 2018. 290 cases made. —T.F.

ROBERT FOLEY Merlot Napa Valley 2010 Score: 91 / \$52



Rocco Ceselin

Mark Herold of Napa's Celani Family winery examines Merlot vines in the "Tenacious" vineyard block.

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Combines good focus and structure with richness and power. Aromas of currant and mineral lead to flavors of cherry, mocha and olive. Should bloom with time. Best from 2015 through 2021. 900 cases made. —*T.F.*

Sunday, June 30, 2013
Zinfandel Stars

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MARTIN RAY Merlot Diamond Mountain District Reserve 2009 **Score: 90 | \$45**

Focused and well-structured, with appealing red currant and toasty vanilla aromas, featuring layered cherry, tomato leaf and cedar flavors. Drink now through 2018. 800 cases made. —*T.F.*

BUENA VISTA Merlot Carneros 2010 **Score: 89 | \$20**

Elegant and balanced, with toasted red currant aromas and lively cherry, tomato leaf and spice flavors that finish soft, showing ripe tannins. Drink now through 2017. 1,981 cases made. —*T.F.*

CHARLES KRUG Merlot Napa Valley 2010 **Score: 89 | \$24**

Vibrant and crucial, with red currant and tomato leaf aromas and appealing flavors of cherry, mineral and spice. Drink now through 2017. 9,217 cases made. —*T.F.*

PEJU Merlot Napa Valley 2010 **Score: 89 | \$35**

Soft and fleshy, with aromas of currant and black olive, offering straightforward flavors of cherry, herb and mineral. Drink now through 2018. 4,562 cases made. —*T.F.*

ST. SUPÉRY Merlot Rutherford 2010 **Score: 89 | \$50**

Well-structured, if a bit tightly wound, showing aromas of black cherry and cedar, with complex but firm currant, mineral and bitter chocolate flavors. Best from 2014 through 2020. 1,451 cases made. —*T.F.*

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