

Call me a Cab ... or a

Merlot

by Marlene Rossman



Hidden gem Bordeaux-style reds from around the country

For many years, the most prestigious wines in the world were the red wines of Bordeaux. Red Bordeaux are always blends, but the dominant grape is usually either Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. Although those grapes first rose to fame in Bordeaux, France, they have become wildly successful and popular in the United States.

California Cabernet Sauvignon has been world-class for quite a while. Back in 1976, at the “Judgment of Paris” wine competition, a California Cabernet outranked the top Bordeaux wines. The French judges were so shocked that they had judged California’s wines to be superior that they tried to change their scoring of the wines!

Fast-forward to today, and many California Cabernets and Cabernet blends are extremely popular and often as expensive or more expensive than the wines of Bordeaux. Some iconic “cult Cabernets” from California cost up to \$750 a bottle at release. But don’t worry about having to raise that much cash—you can only get one of these rarities if you are a mailing-list customer or buy them on the secondary market at a huge markup. But, as we will see, there is no need to spend down what’s left of your 401k to get great Cabernet or Merlot.

Great American reds don’t come only from California. For close to two decades, Washington state has been hot on California’s heels when it comes to great Cabernet and Merlot. And some may be surprised to hear that the North Fork of Long Island, N.Y., now produces some astounding Merlot and Cabernet Franc (the third leading grape of Bordeaux).

One of the biggest differences between Bordeaux and U.S. Cabernets/blends is that most Bordeaux wines need years of aging to be “drinking” well. American Cabernets may also be better when they have a bit of

age, but the majority are meant to be drunk before your grandchildren retire.

The French have been making great red wines in Bordeaux since the Middle Ages, but the Cabernet Sauvignon grape dates back only to the 17th century—it was the “love child” of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, a white grape. Cab Sauv caught on quickly because it is an easy grape to grow, especially when compared to Pinot Noir. Today, it flourishes far from its original French home—in places from Chile and Argentina to Israel and Lebanon to Australia, South Africa and Canada.

Red Bordeaux can also include some other grapes—Malbec, Petite Verdot and Carménere—and these have also traveled quite a distance. Malbec is still grown in southwest France, but it has now found a thriving home in Argentina. And Carménere, which came to Chile in the 19th century, was first mistaken for Merlot, but now is holding its own.

California Cabernets and Meritages

California produces wines from literally hundreds of grapes, but the wine that seems to best define California is Cabernet Sauvignon. These Cabs are ripe and rich with big flavors of black cherry, chocolate and cassis.

California Cabs can be either 100 percent Cabernet or Bordeaux-style blends, which include Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petite Verdot and/or a bit of Malbec. Industry insiders call these blends “Meritage” (rhymes with heritage). These wines are so popular that there is even a 20-year-old organization called The Meritage Alliance (www.meritagewine.org) that is devoted to the promotion of Meritage wines. In Bordeaux, one never sees a straight Cabernet or Merlot—they are all blends.

Napa County has been referred to as “the Bordeaux

of California,” so expect to find expensive but superb red wines made from Bordeaux grapes. In the Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon rules. The climate is so well-suited to growing the grape that virtually every winery there either currently produces a version of Cabernet Sauvignon, or has produced one at some time in its history. And most of them are very, very good.

Cabernet Sauvignon is usually medium- to full-bodied. It is densely colored and full of rich flavors like black cherry, chocolate and vanilla. Cabernet is traditionally aged in oak, and the wood barrels flavor the wines. Cab Sauv lends itself well to critics’ bodacious prose. “Dark ruby-colored and sporting a nose of violets, sweet blueberries, dark cherries and slight undertones of asphalt, the 2006 XYXYZ Cabernet Sauvignon blossoms on the palate to expose a wine of ethereal delicacy yet immense power. It expands to reveal concentrated layers of cassis, blackberries, red cherries, raspberries, spices and touches of candied plum, licorice, graphite, espresso, black currant, truffle, creosote, soy sauce and earth...” And this guy is just getting started!

While all of Napa produces marvelous Cabernet Sauvignon, some of the Golden State’s very best Cabs come from Rutherford, a small region within Napa and considered one of the “sweet spots” for great Cabernet Sauvignon. Rutherford began producing top-notch Cabernet more than a century ago. Wines made from grapes grown in this area are said to show “Rutherford dust,” which is shorthand for aromatic flavors of ripe blackberry, spice, cigar box and earth. Rutherford Cabernet is considered the “ne plus ultra” of Cabs. Some of the best to look for in the 2005/’06/’07 vintages are:

- 12C (Twelve C) Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Georges III

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- Conn Creek Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Hozhoni Vineyard
- Frank Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve
- Freemark Abbey Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Sycamore Vineyard
- Frog's Leap Winery Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon
- Monticello Vineyards (Corley Family) Tietjen Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon
- Peju Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve
- Raymond Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve
- Sequoia Grove Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve
- Slaughterhouse Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve
- Staglin Family Vineyard Estate Cabernet Sauvignon
- Tres Sabores Estate Cabernet Sauvignon "Perspective"
- William Harrison Vineyards Estate Rutherford Red

California's great Cabernets and blends don't come just from the Rutherford area of Napa; there are many other regions and subregions, called appellations, that produce marvelous Cab. Some of the other great subregions of Napa include Oakville, Calistoga, St. Helena, Howell Mountain, Mount Veeder and Yountville. Nearby Sonoma County is a slightly cooler climate region—but delicious, world-class Cabernets and Cab blends are also coming out of Sonoma, and they are often priced more moderately than those from Napa. Lately, other areas, including Paso Robles, Central Coast, Lake County and other California regions, have begun strutting their classy Cabs and Merlots. Some to look for are:

- Chalk Hill Estate Cabernet Sauvignon
- Damian Rae Winery Cabernet Sauvignon
- Flora Springs Winery "Trilogy"
- Hall Wines "Kathryn Hall" Cabernet Sauvignon
- Hidden Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon
- Jana Winery "Cathedral"
- Jordan Winery Cabernet Sauvignon
- Karl Lawrence Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon
- Kunde Family Estate Cabernet Sauvignon
- Niner Wine Estates "Fog Catcher" Meritage
- O'Brien Estate "Seduction"
- Palmaz Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon
- Pedroncelli Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Block 007
- Perry Moore Cabernet Sauvignon "To Kalon"
- Six Sigma Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon

Cabernet Sauvignon and food

Cabernet Sauvignon is a bold and assertive wine that has potential to overwhelm light and delicate dishes. When Cabernet Sauvignon is young, all those elements are at their peak, but, as the wine ages, it mellows. In most circumstances, matching the weight of the wine to the heaviness of the food is an important consideration. Mild spices, such as black pepper, pair better because of their ability to minimize the perception of tannins—such as in the classic pairings of Cabernet Sauvignon with rare roast beef, steak au poivre, beef casseroles, chateaubriand, cheeseburgers and beef Stroganoff.

Fats and proteins soften the taste of tannins on the palate. When Cabernet Sauvignon is paired with steak or dishes with a heavy butter cream sauce, the tannins are neutralized, allowing the fruits in the wine to shine. The bitterness of the tannins can also be counterbalanced by cooking methods such as barbecuing, charring or grilling. Cheese pairings include: cheddar, Parmesan, Brie, aged blue cheese and other "stinky" cheeses like Camembert and Gorgonzola.

California Merlots

The 2004 movie *Sideways*, a hilarious tribute to the "joy of Pinot Noir," poked fun at Merlot—so much so that sales of Merlot were down for awhile. But do not discount Merlot's importance in the world of wine. Merlot has been a Cab alternative for many—similar in many ways but more fruit-forward and less tannic. It's considered the softer side of Cabernet Sauvignon—easy, early drinking and mellow years before tannic Cabs are ready for consumption. Some of the signature flavors and aromas of Merlot include plums, currants, black cherries, blackberries, vanilla, coconut, mocha and cedar.

Some marvelous California Merlots and Merlot-based blends are:

- Audelssa Estate Winery "Summit"
- Blackstone Winery Merlot
- Cakebread Cellars Merlot
- Cerro Prieto Vineyard Merlot Reserve
- Duckhorn Vineyards Merlot
- Palazzo Napa Valley Red Wine
- Sawyer Cellars Merlot Rutherford
- Solis Winery "Cara Mia"



Merlot and food

Heavier, Cabernet-like Merlots pair well with many of the same things that Cabernet Sauvignon would pair well with, such as grilled and roasted meats. Lamb- and veal-based dishes are especially good with Merlot. Softer, fruitier Merlots (particularly those with higher acidity from cooler climate regions like Washington state) also pair well with lighter dishes such as salmon, tuna, swordfish, pork preps and mushroom-based dishes.

Merlot, with its juicy dark fruit flavors, goes well with many meat dishes such as stews, hamburgers, meatloaf and pot roast. Other great pairings include: Cornish hen, duck, goose, roast chicken, roast turkey, lamb chops, pasta Bolognese, short ribs, tandoori dishes, ostrich, pheasant, venison and wild boar. "Cheesy" pairings include cheddar, Gouda and Jarlsberg—all good choices with Merlot.

California Cabernet Francs and blends

Cabernet Franc is not often found as a single varietal, as it is most often used in blending. It can be "green" tasting and sometimes vegetal, but when it's vinified well, it can be superb. This medium-bodied, ruby red wine has signature aromas of plums, raspberries, lavender, pepper, vanilla, coconut, toast, mushroom and earth. Here are some to look for:

- Hagafen Cellars Cabernet Franc
- Lang & Reed Wine Co. Cabernet Franc
- Murphy Vineyards Meritage
- Pride Mountain Vineyards Cabernet Franc
- Viader Vineyards Red Wine
- William Harrison Vineyards Cabernet Franc
- Yorkville Cellars Cabernet Franc

Cabernet Franc and food

Cabernet Franc is usually higher in acid than Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot, and that makes it a great companion to many foods. The lighter versions (those with less tannin and more acid) pair well with things like veal or turkey schnitzel and quiche. Try Cab Franc with grilled swordfish, grilled portobellos, ham, roast pork, duck, Asian noodle dishes, curries, game birds, lasagna, pizza, eggplant, choucroute garnie, roasted vegetables, Mexican mole dishes, Indian curries, steak tartare, pasta ragù and turkey.

Washington state Cabernets and Merlots

Because of the "terroir"—the geography and cooler climate—of Washington state, Washington Cabernets and Merlots have a taste profile considered by some to be halfway between the ripeness of California and the austerity of Bordeaux. Most of Washington's Cabernets and Merlots, though just as delicious as California's, are a little more restrained, a bit less ripe and with a slightly higher acid content.

The iconic Quilceda Creek winery produces some of the best Cabernets in Washington state—and priciest, but reasonable when compared to Napa Cabs. These, too, are only available to mailing-list customers. But close on the heels of Quilceda come wineries producing some stupendous Cabernets, including:

- Andrew Will Winery "Sorella"
- Betz Family Winery "Pere de Famille"
- Cadence Winery "Camerata"
- Fidelitas Winery "Ciel du Cheval"
- Januik Winery "Champoux"
- Kestrel Vintners Signature "Old Vine" Cabernet Sauvignon
- Reininger Winery Cabernet Sauvignon

Washington also produces what many believe to be some of the best Merlots and Merlot-based blends vinified in the United States. Look for:

- Boudreaux Cellars Merlot
- Columbia Crest Winery "Walter Clore" Private Reserve
- Northstar Winery Columbia Valley Merlot and Walla Walla Valley Merlot
- Owen Roe Winery Yakima Valley Red
- Walla Walla Vintners Merlot
- Hard Row to Hoe Vineyards Cabernet Franc

New York Merlots

New York state's Long Island (including the chic Hamptons) might seem an unlikely place for world-class Merlot blends, but look for these standouts:

- Bouké Wines Red
- Castello di Borghese Vineyard Merlot Reserve
- Macari Vineyards Merlot
- Martha Clara Vineyards Merlot
- Long Island Merlot Alliance "Merliance" Merlot
- Pellegrini Vineyards Merlot
- Raphael Estate Merlot
- Wölffer Estates "Lambardo" Merlot
- Paumanok Vineyards Cabernet Franc

Whether you choose a Cab Sauv, a Merlot or a Cab Franc, you will find a great American wine to pair with your next standing rib roast, Wagyu filet mignon—or bacon double cheeseburger! 🍴

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