

MERLOT  
LOS CARNEROS  
NAPA VALLEY  
2003



ROBERT SINSKEY VINEYARDS  
R S V  
NAPA, CALIFORNIA

## PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999

The roaring nineties sure were a lot of fun. Optimism ruled the day. Technology proved at least temporary salvation as dot-coms brought in millions of dollars for businesses without business plans or revenue models. It seemed all one had to do was come up with a cute name, design a catchy web site and success followed. It didn't matter that the infrastructure wasn't yet developed or that the stock's selling price couldn't be justified. The heady days distracted the normal rules of business.

The nineties were also a lot of fun for Merlot producers. For a while, the varietal name Merlot minted gold. No matter where it came from, people irrationally clamored for it. If you drank Merlot you were cool— you were a player. Eventually all it took was someone to lift their nose from their glass and say, “There is no there, there!” for the

bubble to burst. Merlot planted without purpose, without regard to place, had no substance. It made for drinkable wine, but many could not justify their inflated price.

When the bubble burst it made for a painful, but healthy correction for both tech and Merlot. Dot-coms without substance folded and Merlot vines planted without respect to terroir were ripped out.

Today tech stocks roar ahead of expectations... and are real businesses based on real consumer needs. Merlot is back in the nurturing hands of artisans who hold the land as sacred and treat the vines with respect. It's the bubble's opposite. Well-made Merlot is now a high quality wine with a great price-value relationship. I think it's time to party like it's 1999!



## HANDS ON! HANDS OFF!

To be hands off, you need to be hands on. It's hard to stay out of a wine's way in the cellar if you haven't laid the groundwork. Hands-off winemaking's primary demand is healthy, expressive fruit, and so necessitates a decidedly hands-on approach in the vineyards. The winegrowers of Europe all recognize this in their lack of a word for "winemaker." German, French, Spanish and Italian all leave that mantle to the yeasts and instead describe their wine folk as growers.

A winegrower first must consult the genius of his land to divine which grapes to plant. More than two decades ago, RSV planted Merlot on three estate vineyards in the cool Carneros, prompting some head scratching on the part of many neighbors. Conventional wisdom preached Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in Carneros, but RSV is no slave to convention. The empirical evidence of heat summation and soil structure pointed to Merlot as an ideal candidate for RSV's Carneros vineyards.

Merlot in Bordeaux plays not only as a perfect blending partner for Cabernet Sauvignon, but also serves as a vinous hedge against the cooler years that often visit the region. Merlot experiences bud-break as many as two weeks earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon and builds sugar more easily, making the variety a perfect match for cool growing regions like St. Emilion, Pomerol and Carneros. However, plant Merlot outside its natural element, say on a sweltering valley floor, and by the time the grapes reach engustment, or physiological maturity, their natural acid and potential alcohol will fall out of balance, yielding boastful wines that bellow from the glass but have little to say.

The Carneros region, by virtue of the moderating influence of nearby San Pablo Bay, enjoys relatively cool daytime temperatures,

providing the correspondent long growing season Merlot prefers. In cool Carneros, Merlot marches towards sugar and phenolic ripeness in lockstep, producing balanced, expressive wines that do not require the questionable gifts of modern winemaking technology.

Merlot likes wet feet, the vigneronns say. Carneros is eager to please in this regard with its clay soils and foggy blanket. There's an up-and-comer in Pomerol with similar soil structure, a place where the clay sneaks right to the surface under a little chateau called Petrus. Here, the genius of the place chose Merlot, and to great advantage.

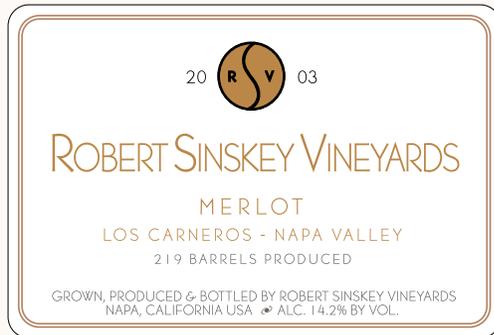
Pure farming allows hands-off winemaking. Grapes not juiced up with synthetic fertilizers, which, by the way, are mostly petrochemically derived, are smaller and up to five times more packed with cells, especially in the skins. Red wines owe nearly all their color, and much of their flavor and feel, to the fact that they are fermented on their skins. RSV's small, dense berries create a skin-to-juice ratio that keeps the lid on the toolbox of industrial winemaking. No need for saignée (bleeding off juice to concentrate the skin-to-juice ratio) if the grapes are balanced to begin with.

Organic farming nurtures the health of the vineyard, creating a live and vibrant soil that finds a voice in its produce. A careful and light hand in the cellar, made possible by good farming, avoids muffling that voice and provides a worthy companion to your best efforts in the kitchen. RSV produces wines of subtlety and complexity meant to drink with food, not as cocktails or in competition with other wines.



Solar Powered Harvest

## WINEGROWING NOTES



2003 was weird, but it seems weird is the new normal. An unusually warm March woke the vines up early from their winter's nap, only to be greeted with one of the coldest and wettest Aprils on record. The cold and wet both delayed and hampered flowering and fruit set, effectively limiting yields. Things then dried out and moderate weather prevailed until a few heat spikes in late August and September rushed the grapes to ripeness and harvest ensued fast and furious.

Merlot arrived in the RSV cellar between September 20th and 26th, each block harvested at the magical intersection of ripeness and structure. After fermentation, the new wine retired to the caves in 30% new French oak barrels for eighteen months and aged in bottle an additional eighteen months before release. A dollop of Merlot's Bordelaise sibling, Cabernet Sauvignon, constitutes 17 percent of the blend.

## TASTING NOTES

Miles away from your average Merlot... Deep opaque black violet resolves to ruby red where the wine touches the glass. Scents of sweet fennel, violets, sous-de-bois and dark stone fruit waft from a well-swirled stem. Flavors of thyme-scented crisp plum, vanilla and earth engulf the tongue with velvety tannins. What's for dinner?



## OH, STUFF-IT!



Yes, stuffing sounds a little old fashioned, but who cares what others think... your guests sure won't after they taste this luscious filling with this succulent bird. The fresh pecans have an inherent sweetness that goes beautifully with the elegant fruit of the Merlot and the wine's bright acidity tempers the richness of the oil-packed nuts. If you feel the apples are too subtle, try using dried cranberries or sour cherries for a bold twist. Don't forget to pose for pictures as you remove the bird from the oven in your good old-fashioned apron and oven mitts.

Until the next wine...

Maria

## ROAST CHICKEN OR CAPON WITH PECAN-APPLE STUFFING

Serves 4 to 6

I love the bit of sweet tartness the apples give this stuffing while the pecans add a wonderfully nutty crunch. The two together make an elegant stuffing full of texture and flavor. Extra stuffing can be baked on the side in a buttered baking dish.

(BTW, A capon is a castrated rooster with much larger breasts than a hen. Go figure!)

<i>6 tablespoons unsalted butter</i>	<i>2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme</i>
<i>2 cups diced apple, ½ inch pieces</i>	<i>1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary</i>
<i>Salt</i>	<i>1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage</i>
<i>Freshly ground black pepper</i>	<i>2 tablespoon chopped fresh flat leaf parsley</i>
<i>1 medium yellow onions, diced finely</i>	<i>½ 1 pound peasant loaf, cut into ½ inch cubes, lightly toasted</i>
<i>1 ½ cups thinly sliced celery</i>	<i>1 cup lightly toasted pecan halves</i>
<i>2 cups chicken stock</i>	<i>1 5-pound chicken or Capon</i>



1. Heat 2 tablespoons of butter in a large sauté pan over medium high heat. When the butter begins to brown, add the apples. Season the apples with salt and pepper and sauté them until they are golden, about 5 minutes.
2. Add the onions and celery to the apples and continue to cook for 5 to 6 until the onions are golden and the celery is tender, season with salt and pepper and turn out into the bowl with the apples. Add the chicken stock to the pan and bring it to a boil. Loosen browned bits on the bottom of the pan, add the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter and then pour the stock over the apples and vegetables in the bowl.
3. Add the herbs, bread and pecans to the bowl and mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper and mix well again. Place the stuffing in the refrigerator to chill thoroughly. The stuffing may be made a day in advance.
4. Preheat the oven to 450 degrees F. Trim the excess fat from around the neck and body cavities of the chicken. Stuff the neck cavity and the body cavity with the stuffing. Bake the remaining stuffing on the side.
5. Place the stuffed chicken in a roasting pan and bake in the preheated oven for 20 minutes. Reduce the heat to 375 degrees F and continue roasting for 1 ½ hours or until an instant read thermometer reads 160 degrees F when inserted into the center of the stuffed body cavity. Let the chicken rest for 15 minutes before carving. Remove the stuffing from the cavity and serve on the side. Note: The stuffing may be baked outside the bird at 375 degrees F for 45 to 50 minutes until puffed and golden, add one additional cup of chicken stock to keep it from drying out.

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