

MERLOT  
LOS CARNEROS  
2006



ROBERT SINSKEY VINEYARDS  
R S V  
NAPA, CALIFORNIA

# IT'S A FINE LINE, Between Love and Hate...

By Rob Sinskey

"This wine sucks!" - "I love this wine!" One variety, two people, two opinions. The wine in question is Merlot. At best, Merlot is a luscious mouthful; at worst, Merlot is a luscious mouthful. This is not a contradiction.

The problem with Merlot is that, in the New World anyway, we tend to think of it as a variety divorced of place. We are guilty of applying this approach to all varieties, but Merlot has suffered the most from this misguided, marketing-driven mentality.

Merlot performs reasonably well over a relatively broad range of climates. This sounds like a good thing on the surface. A nice reliable grape to hang your spreadsheet on. The problem with reliability is that it can lead to boredom and neglect, turning an artisanal, hand made beverage into an industrial liquid commodity.

There are two camps when it comes to making wine: those who feel wine is defined by the vineyard and those who feel wine is a lump of clay for them to shape into a preconceived, marketable form. The former describes the terroirist camp, the latter the industrialist camp.

Although everyone says that wine is made in the vineyard, the statement rings false when a winemaker uses spinning cones or reverse osmosis to reduce alcohol or employs any number of additives, enzymes or flavoring agents.

One can claim these methods have resulted in better wine at better prices and, at the value end of the market, I can't argue with that statement. I still remember the old jug wines that tasted like mothballs. However, consumers would be better served if winemakers spent their time matching variety to place instead of employing the tricks of the trade.

People are still confused by the idea of terroir. Many think it refers to the taste of the earth, but this is only part of the story. It can be better described as the character of the place as influenced by three major forces: 1. The Natural Environment: weather, climate, topography, day length, aspect, etc. 2. The Earth: soil texture, structure and content. 3. The Human: the ability of the vigneron to "read" the place by identifying the proper variety, clone and rootstock most appropriate for the location. Since terroir can either be advanced or masked by choices made by the farmer or the winemaker, the human element of terroir must include sound farm and cellar practices that respect, elevate and express the specificities that contribute to the character of the wine.

Since Merlot responds well to remedial winemaking, it can produce a serviceable wine from a wide range of climates. However, when grown in less than optimal regions, Merlot often needs "fixing" in the cellar and while the resulting wine may hit all the marks, it somehow lacks the vibrancy and life of a wine that is true to terroir.

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Bordeaux, with its long history of growing Merlot, has had time to evaluate how region and variety influence quality. The Bordelaise have almost twice as much Merlot planted as the next most popular grape, Cabernet Sauvignon. Merlot contributes to nearly every red Bordeaux wine, and its plantings are on the rise even on the Cabernet-centric Left Bank. However, most regions tend to subordinate Merlot in a blend or produce a modest Merlot-based wine at a lower price. Of the fifty-seven appellations within Bordeaux, only Saint Emilion and Pomerol elevate Merlot to rock star status. They let the region speak and allow it to define the wine.



Merlot’s suppleness is the reason most people love it, yet the texture can easily slip into insipid territory if the grape is not well matched to the place. This is why Merlot is used so often in Europe as a blending grape; it can add lusciousness to the mix while the other varieties can supply the structure. However, planted in the right cool climate location, Merlot exhibits both suppleness and structure with just the right amount of acidity to give the wine life and enough supple tannin for longevity.

RSV grows Merlot in three of five Carneros vineyards where the grape achieves optimal sugar ripeness in sync with physiological ripeness. If you haven’t figured it out by now, RSV belongs to the terroirist camp of winegrowing. Merlot+Carneros=Love!

## WINEGROWING NOTES

By Eric Sothorn

The moderate climate of the Carneros region promises a careful vigneron balanced, ripe, and flavorful Merlot. You've probably heard that Carneros is the coolest AVA in Napa Valley and that's true. What's less often mentioned is that the maritime influence of the San Pablo Bay mitigates nighttime lows as well as daytime highs, making for a narrow range of diurnal temperatures. Now, some excellent wines do come from areas with wide swings in diurnal temperature. But, contrary to many press releases extolling the benefits of significant cooling at night, vines physiologically prefer a narrow swing in temperatures, not too hot, and not too cold. When it gets too chilly at night, the vine shuts down. Mild overnight temperatures allow night ripening of flavors and phenolics in the dark hours, while moderate highs allow relatively slow sugar development without the stress associated with warmer climates.

RSV planted Merlot in Carneros in the eighties on the educated hunch that its maritime climate and clay soils would remind the grape of Pomerol or St. Emilion. It paid off. In Carneros, Merlot builds sugar in step with flavor development, while maintaining bright, natural acidity, yielding complex wines with distinctive and recognizable character.



RSV helps the vine along by balancing yields and canopies to manage sugar ripening. Deficit irrigation causes the vine to question its longevity in situ, and release a hormone that accelerates physiological ripening of the fruit and its seeds, diverting energy from vegetative growth to fruit ripening.

2006 was a long and relatively cool growing season, not unlike 2005, but ever so slightly warmer. RSV grows Merlot in three of five certified organic and Biodynamic Carneros vineyards that range from northern (The

## 100% CCOF Certified Organic and Demeter Certified Biodynamic Vineyards

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Vandal Vineyard) and mid-Carneros (The OSR Vineyard) to the coolest, most southern (The Three Amigos Vineyard) section. The first block of Merlot was taken on September 19th, with seven additional lots coming in as they reached optimal ripeness over the following month. Cabernet Sauvignon from RSV's Vandal Vineyard lends RSV's Merlot its sturdy frame and structure, making up 15% of the final blend. The wine rested in 40% new French oak barrels for nineteen months.

### TASTING NOTES:

By Eric Sothern

A swirl of the glass leaves pigmented tears that slide down to rejoin the core color of bright purplish ruby. Black cherry and plum aromas vie for olfactory attention with more savory aromas of fennel, violet, freshly baked bread with herb cured olives and sun warmed earth. These flavors follow through upon a sip, joined by enticing notes of bittersweet cocoa. It's supple, richly textured and long in the mouth, like Merlot must be, but ripe tannins and a bright crisp cut keep it refreshing. 158 Barrels Produced. (07/09)

## COMFORT FOOD FOR COMFORT WINE....

Pasta is the ultimate comfort food. I find it particularly satisfying when the golden strands glisten with a sauce that is chock full of the ingredients I love: rich pancetta, sweet cherry tomatoes from the garden, just harvested sweet onions, and fragrant basil. The only thing that makes it better is a glass of nicely balanced RSV Merlot. This velvety wine with fine ripe tannins, dark cherry fruit and a kiss of acidity is perfect with a big bowl of pasta. You don't have to think too much about the pairing, just let it be, and enjoy!

Until the next wine...

Maria



# BUCATINI WITH CHERRY TOMATOES, PANCETTA, SWEET ONIONS AND BASIL

Serves 6 to 8

*1/2 pound pancetta*

*2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil*

*2 medium, sweet yellow onions, sliced into thin wedges*

*2 cups cherry tomatoes*

*Kosher salt*

*Freshly ground black pepper*

*1 pound Bucatini pasta*

*1/2 cup packed basil leaves, torn*

*1/4 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese plus more to sprinkle*

1. Unroll the pancetta and slice into 1/4-inch thick strips, then dice into 1/4-inch pieces.
2. Heat a 12-inch sauté pan over medium heat and add the pancetta. Slowly cook the pancetta until the fat is exuded and the pancetta starts to turn golden, about 5 to 7 minutes.
3. Remove the pancetta from the pan and drain off the fat into a measuring cup. Add 2 tablespoons back to the pan along with the olive oil and heat over medium high heat.
4. Add the sliced onions and cook until they are translucent and beginning to brown. Add the cherry tomatoes to the pan and cook until the tomatoes start to split. Add the pancetta back to the pan. Remove the pan from the heat and season with salt and pepper to taste. Reserve in the pan. (The sauce may also be refrigerated at this point for up to two days and reheated when you are ready to cook the pasta.)
5. Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil and lightly salt. Add the pasta to the water and cook according to the directions on the package. Cook the pasta al dente. Drain the pasta into a strainer placed over a bowl to catch the cooking water. Reserve 2 cups of the water.
6. Bring the sauce in the sauté pan to a boil and add the hot pasta. Toss to coat the pasta and then add pasta-cooking water, 1/2 cup at a time, to loosen the pasta and add volume to the sauce. When the consistency of the sauce is loose yet coats the strands of pasta add the cheese and the torn basil leaves. Toss again and check the seasoning.
7. Serve the pasta from the pan or turn into a serving bowl. Serve with additional cheese on the side.

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