



ROBERT SINSEY VINEYARDS

MERLOT, LOS CARNEROS, NAPA VALLEY 2015





MERLOT SALVATION...

By Rob Sinskey

Cool (climate) Merlot!

Merlot was our salvation. Merlot almost destroyed us. Both of these statements are true. However, this is more of a story of how fashion impacts winegrowing than anything.

Merlot was a relatively obscure grape when I entered the wine world in the 80's. Our goal was to grow Pinot Noir but we saw opportunity with Merlot. Very little was known about the grape (most people pronounced it mare-lât) and very little was planted. Other than a few boutique brands, you rarely saw Merlot on a label. In 1980, there were around 700 acres of Merlot in Napa. For comparison, there were around 2300 acres of Pinot Noir - a number that hasn't changed much to this day. Napa Merlot peaked around 2001 with around 7500 acres and today we have around 4600 acres left. Merlot rocketed to success and then fell from grace...and we were caught in the middle of the vortex.

We were first and foremost Pinot Noir producers, but we had a problem: Pinot Noir wasn't popular when we started. We needed to hedge our bets, so in addition to Pinot Noir, we planted Chardonnay because it was popular and Merlot because we felt it was underplanted and was about to be "discovered." It caught us by surprise when Merlot took off so quickly. As sommelier/author Kelli White wrote in the GuildSomm blog about California Merlot: "The Merlot phenomenon seemed to sneak up on California during the 1980s, with total acreage hovering between 2,000 and 4,000 for much of the decade. By 1991, however, that figure doubled to over 8,000 and would reach nearly 50,000 acres (California total) by 2000." Today the total acreage is around 38,500.

We, as a new struggling winery, could not ignore the success we were having with Merlot before Pinot Noir became popular. It wasn't just financial success; we discovered our cool Carneros vineyards were ideal for the early ripening Merlot grape and the attention to detail we learned from working with Pinot Noir paid off in Merlot that was more elegant and vibrant than most. But the big companies saw opportunity in anything labeled Merlot and soon the plantings skyrocketed and the overall quality in the market took a nose-dive. Merlot went from being the default red wine of choice in the nineties to being the butt of a joke sometime in the aughts. Overnight, Merlot was out of fashion as sales dropped by 50% and almost no one wanted to taste a wine labelled Merlot, let alone buy a bottle. It is easy to blame the movie "Sideways" for the popularity shift, but the movie just made public what we had all been saying for years - Merlot was being planted in the wrong areas, it was overproduced and haphazardly made with the emphasis on technique over growing region.

The downfall of Merlot was a financial hit that almost tipped the scales against us as a grower winery - it is hard to pivot when fashions change and your product is coming from vines that hopefully will produce grapes for 30+ years. So we went underground and continued to make better wine based on Merlot. We put more emphasis on blends, we listened to our vineyards and pulled vineyard blocks that did not express Merlot to its fullest... and we waited for the fashionistas to make the unhip hip again. That is beginning to happen. More sommeliers are requesting Merlot and we grow and make one that satisfies the palates of the food-centric consumer as well as the chefs and sommeliers of the world.

We make wines we like to drink. We think that if you grow the right grapes in a location where the sugars evolve with the physiological ripeness of the grapes, you have the opportunity to make delicious wines... because a delicious, well grown and crafted wine is a delicious wine no matter what you call it.

Winegrowing Notes

Merlot is as site sensitive as Pinot Noir. The difference is that Merlot can produce a serviceable wine from a wider range of climates than Pinot Noir, but it only becomes transcendent when planted in the right location. Merlot loves a cooler growing region like RSV's organically farmed Carneros vineyards. It is an early ripening grape that needs that cooler climate to develop flavor in sync with the sugars. Grapes have more time on the vine to develop more complex flavor and more supple tannins without losing the acidity that triggers your mouth to water and makes for an elegant accompaniment to a wide range of cuisine. RSV has three vineyards in the Carneros region that run from its northern-most boundary, The Vandal Vineyard, through its middle, The OSR Vineyard, and to its south, The Three Amigos Vineyard. The luxury of having these vineyards in three different Carneros locations is that we can craft the ideal cuvée from the vintage by selecting lots from and within each vineyard. Need to make the wine brighter...blend a little more Three Amigos. Want more plum fruit...blend a little more Vandal. More choices and less manipulation make for a better wine.

Tasting Notes - by Phil Abram & Jeff Virnig

This 2015 Merlot has a striking, brooding intensity from the moment the cork is pulled. A deep, rich, ruby crimson color captures your eye as primary aromas of red berry, black cherry and plum waft from the glass. Secondary notes of bay leaf, fresh leather and mocha add power and complexity. The first sip is an explosion of flavor, with waves of ripe, dark, red stone fruit and berries bursting through the mid-palate and into a long finish marked by the harmony of juicy brightness and firm tannin. Solid, organic farming that feeds the soil and controls vigor informed an otherwise challenging drought year to produce beautiful fruit. The wine is delicious young with a decant and is on track for decades of graceful evolution that will reward now and at each stage of its development. (08/2020)

487 (12x750ml) cases produced





THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

When you mention eggplant, most people run. Many eggplants found in the big grocery stores are a sad example of a poorly farmed and past-its-prime vegetable. Merlot is like the eggplant of wine. The Merlot grape has suffered from poor farming, but in the right hands, it can soar much like a well-farmed, fresh eggplant properly prepared. RSV's Merlot is a beautiful example of what Merlot can achieve when grown in the right location, picked at the right time and crafted with a delicate hand. It is elegant and restrained with enough plum and cherry fruit to balance the scent of dried herb so valued in Old World Merlots. Tasted blind, RSV's Merlot could easily be mistaken for an elegant Merlot from the Right Bank of Bordeaux.

A good eggplant will be shiny, smooth and heavy like a bowling ball. When cut open, the seeds and flesh should be pale and tender. A fresh eggplant will have a fruity smell and sweetness in its juice. Start with a purple bowling ball like eggplant and you will have success in winning over the most reluctant of eggplant eaters.

Merlot with eggplant isn't your typical match. The sweetness of the eggplant with the tender herbs brings out the fruit and marries nicely with the wine's overall flavors and body. Sprinkle a little cheese over the top to send it all home.

Embrace the good of the eggplant and RSV's Merlot and leave the bad and the ugly in the dust!

Until the Next Wine.... *Maria*



VESUVIO WITH EGGPLANT AND ROMAN HERBS

When I eat this pasta, I dream of Rome. The combination of sweet herbs used in Roman cooking, as well as a hit of anchovy and sprinkle of Romano cheese is what takes me there. While Vesuvio is a delightfully shaped pasta from Naples and not typically Roman, it grips whatever sauce it comes into contact with and it's fun to eat. It also has a nice tooth which makes it a pleasure to consume with the soft caramelized eggplant. If you don't have Vesuvio you can use a nice ribbon pasta such as tagliatelle or pappardelle with good success. A little tomato puree - about ½ cup - can be added with the pasta for acidity to balance the sauce instead of the lemon if you can't imagine a pasta dish without it. Serves 6 to 8

9 cups peeled and cubed eggplant (3 medium eggplant)
Kosher salt
Extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon capers, chopped
½ cup finely chopped briny black or green olives
1 large clove garlic, pressed
¼ cup flat leaf parsley leaves, coarsely chopped

¼ cup basil leaves, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoon mint leaves, coarsely chopped
2 minced anchovies
Freshly ground black pepper
½ lemon
1 cup finely grated Romano cheese
1 pound (½ kilo) Vesuvio Pasta

1. Toss cubed eggplant with 1 tablespoon salt and place in a colander over a bowl to drain for 30 minutes to 1 hour. Squeeze the eggplant dry with your hands and reserve in a bowl.
2. Heat a large sauté pan over medium high heat. Add ¼ cup olive oil and then ½ the eggplant. Sauté until golden about 7 minutes. Remove to a plate and repeat with the remaining eggplant.
3. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil to the same pan over medium high heat. Add the eggplant back to the pan and make a well in the center of the pan. Add the garlic and anchovy and cook until the garlic is lightly toasted, about 30 seconds to 1 minute. Stir in the herbs and mix everything together well.
4. Cook pasta al dente according to the package and reserve 3 cups of the pasta cooking water (it should be lightly salted).
5. Add the pasta to the eggplant pan and toss. Keep tossing and adding pasta water to the pan until the liquid becomes creamy looking and viscous. This is the starch from the pasta thickening the sauce. The pasta should be lightly coated and not clumpy. Add more water to the pan until the pasta and sauce move freely yet the juices are silky. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
6. Squeeze lemon over, adjust seasoning and transfer to a serving platter. Serve with Romano cheese and more black pepper over the top or serve the cheese on the side.



FINE WINES. ORGANIC VINES.

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