

Just Say No to Merlot!
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(original, unedited)

Merlot is the buzz. It's all the rage. It is the #1 fastest growing red grape varietal in consumption in America---again. No matter how they pronounce it, there is no getting around it---it has become today's synonym for a glass of red wine. I will freely admit that it is a far cry from hearty burgundy, and surely you all must agree that it is better than the less-than-educated alternative. You can knock white sin all you like, but there is no question that it put the taste for varietals on the palates of Americans, which in turn, of course, has led to the battle cry of Chardonnay as the white wine of choice by the goblet. It is unheard of to think that Mountain Chablis has become Chardonnay to the consumer, but the glass of red has followed suit --- a lot of Merlot (common pronunciation), I'll accept nothing less.

What is this world coming to? I would agree with the most pretentious of wine geeks that Merlot is a noble grape, of Pomerol and St. Emilion fame, and it is not possible in today's world of rising costs, and subsequently retail prices for wine, to create a true Merlot that is cheap. Merlot has always been at least beyond cheap, but with the mad scramble to plant more grapes to make more wine from the more than mild-mannered Merlot to attempt to keep up with consumer demand, prices are only escalating at an alarming rate. We have actually encountered an actual Merlot shortage! True, wine is governed like all commodities by supply and demand, but how much of one grape can one consume?!

Do not misunderstand---it is not that I say that there is no such thing as well-made, inexpensive Merlot. There is---there just isn't enough of it. Certainly Merlot is made extremely well in many other parts of the world besides those Eastern communes of Bordeaux. But these consumers have been led to believe that Merlot is the grape of choice for their wine-by-the-glass consumption. They want a glass of Merlot for \$4.00 (truly, who wouldn't?) It is our own fault, as usual. We have allowed them to fall into the White Zin/Chard/Merlot trap. We have led them to believe that these are code names for the right flavors, the flavors that we will love and enjoy more than any others, and that by using these words it will enhance the public perception of their wine knowledge (or lack thereof) in front of peers, bartenders, and servers. It is indeed our fault. Why? Because instead of stepping in and guiding them, nurturing them, appreciating their need to expand upon their newfound wine info, we have responded by providing them with the wrong examples of what may very well have been the right wine. We have been duped into our own game of supply and demand. Now the supply has failed to meet the demand, and we are scrambling once again to fill the need.

What will we do?

We can search the world over and find the rest of the world's supply of Merlot. We have.

We can rip up all kinds of other varietals in favor of the flavor of the moment. We are.

We can be snobs and tell our thirsty patrons that Merlot is too expensive to be served by the glass. They will go to your competitor and drink his/her cheap Merlot.

We can find alternatives. They want Merlot.

They want what they have come to perceive as Merlot.

What do they REALLY want?

Merlot, in the mind of most consumers who request, in all innocence, a glass of Merlot, is a glass of red wine that possesses certain qualities that they like. They want soft, velvet, smooth, easy drinking, vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce (winegeekspeak=they want sweet, round dark fruit with soft tannins and not too much acid or spice.) Now I have to assume that the readers of this column have all had at least one drip of some noteworthy, Merlot-based, memory jogging magical juice from a great producer in Pomerol or Napa Valley or Washington or Sonoma or Italy or South Africa or Australia (insert wine region of choice) that is TRULY Merlot. It was, I must assume, memorable for it's firm fruit of plums,

cherries, supple but less-than-shy tannins, exotic spiciness, with decent acidity, and many other nuances such as, perhaps, green pepper and herbs, cedar and leaves and other scents of the forest, peppery heat to enhance the high note spices previously mentioned, and as much mystery and depth as the imagination can at this time conjure. Oh yeah, don't forget that hint of sweet vanilla and the spices and layers of complexity that the judicious use of fine oak barrels adds.

Hmmmm. Does this sound like a case of mistaken identity? Could these be the same two wines? Is it possible that these wines could be fashioned from the same grape? Is Olson such a snob that he refuses to recognize that a simple wine can be made from grapes that are also capable of producing some of the great wines in the world? Perhaps, and most certainly there are well-made, inexpensive Merlots being produced, but if cheap, over-produced, poorly-made, oak chip infected, ice cream sundaes with fruit toppings have become acceptable versions of Merlot that have as little resemblance to decent Merlot as a Big Mac does to a Ribeye, why should we allow our consumers to eat a Big Mac and call it beef? Surely it is not beef! Why should you compromise and serve bad wine just because they are clamoring for it by name? What about those of us who refuse to compromise? There is only so much decent, inexpensive Merlot to be had, and IT is highly allocated!

WHAT CAN WE DO?!

It is our duty to suggest alternatives! But they WANT Merlot! What do I say to them? They won't settle for anything less.

"I do have a lovely Merlot from the Napa Valley. It is an excellent example of the grape. Would you like to try a glass for 9.75, or shall I suggest another delicious wine that is also soft and supple and smooth and velvety, that is 4.00? This is a wine from the Rioja region of Spain...OR...a Ribera del Duero...a Rosso di Montalcino...a wine from the south of France...an Australian Shiraz...a South African Pinotage...a RED Zinfandel...and on and on and on.

Yes, it is true, there are many wines out there that can deliver the qualities that the consumer is seeking in a Merlot. It is OUR job to seek them out. It is our obligation to determine what it is that the consumer enjoys and provide it to them. We cannot teach anyone what they like or don't like---we all taste differently. The trick is to taste wines with the mindset of your consumers. Don't dictate to them what to drink, but rather taste wines searching for like structural components and flavor and spice elements, and share with them your new found discoveries. Make them the person who discovered the new wine for their friends. Empower them with a scrap of new tasting info that they can share, and they will begin the movement to create a new demand, hopefully with a bigger reserve supply. It is definitely a hand sell, but wouldn't it be worth it to buy and sell wines by the glass of REAL value? In most cases it is a case of diligence in your staff training.

We can find new wines that match up to the flavors that consumers are currently associating with Merlot. If we don't, the Merlot game will only continue to get harder to win. The prices will continue to escalate, and the quality of the inexpensive, or even affordable wines, will continue to decline. As for me, I love to savor a great glass of Merlot, and I would be ashamed of myself if I were to allow that to happen. Besides, if we are seeking alternatives for our guests, perhaps we will find in our search wines of better structural balance for food (forward fruit, higher acid, lower alcohol, less oak)---perhaps we will stumble upon options that are more friendly to our chef's menu.