



# Magnificent merlot: Clos Du Val produces some of the best

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Say “red” and the wine that often comes to mind for many oenophiles is cabernet sauvignon. Other red wines seem to stand in cabernet’s broad-shouldered, complex shadow.

Say “merlot” and the responses will be decidedly mixed.

Like cabernet, merlot is another of the great grapes of France’s Bordeaux region. But as a stand-alone varietal, merlot often takes it on the chin. Many wine drinkers see the wine as a more neutral brand destined to please novice wine drinkers’ more pedestrian palates.

But done right and done well, merlot can be every bit as sophisticated as cabernet, yet with a profile filled with luscious fruit that can be softer on the palate.

Moreover, merlot ages well.

Few do merlot quite as well as Ted Henry, winemaker for Clos Du Val in California’s Napa Valley.

Henry says producing a great merlot is a matter of growing conditions, as well as a respect for the grape’s potential. The various merlots produced by Clos Du Val illustrate that Henry knows of what he speaks.



PHOTOS: CLOS DU VAL  
Ted Henry, winemaker for Clos Du Val in California's Napa Valley. Right: One of Clos Du Val's vineyards.



**Wisconsin Gazette: Merlot has taken a pretty bad rap from some wine drinkers, perhaps most famously from actor Paul Giamatti as the hapless, would-be wine sophisticate Miles in the 2004 film *Sideways*. Why is this?**

Ted Henry: Interestingly, I think some of the issues with people's perceptions of merlot go back further than *Sideways* to 1991, when the show *60 Minutes* ran a story called "The French Paradox." This report linked red wine consumption with certain health benefits and a lot of people began drinking red wine as a result.

This said, the average American palate was not ready for tannic, bold reds like cabernet sauvignon, so merlot became very popular for its fruity and drinkable profile. As a result, it was widely planted to meet demand. Unfortunately, the vast quantities of merlot produced from many of these plantings were weak, slightly sweet and of low quality. Because of this, the reputation of merlot suffered.

When farmed properly, in the right locations, and made with care and attention, merlot can without question be one of the finest wines in the world.

### **What goes into making an exceptional merlot?**

High-quality merlot requires the same kind of thoughtful cultivation and care as great cabernet sauvignon. In the vineyard, it flowers and ripens earlier, so it is often harvested earlier than cabernet. Many of the winemaking techniques are similar, including our approach to fermentation and barrel aging. Because the tannin levels tend to be lower in merlot, we apply a different approach to maceration.



PHOTO: COURTESY CLOS DU VAL  
**"The 2012 vintage provided perfect conditions to make a merlot in our hallmark style. It is a very elegant, structured wine, with pure, vibrant fruit layers," says Ted Henry of Clos Du Val.**

**I would have once said most merlot may not be worth the trouble to cultivate it until I tasted your 2012 Merlot (\$35), which I found exceptional. What characteristics of that wine made it such a standout?**

The 2012 vintage provided perfect conditions to make a merlot in our hallmark style. It is a very elegant, structured wine, with pure, vibrant fruit layers.

The 2013 growing season yielded another stellar vintage for merlot. While each wine is certainly unique, I think they also show a real continuity of style, which reflects both our terroir and a consistency in terms of winemaking approach. Like the 2012, the 2013 Merlot (\$35) is beautifully balanced, with silky tannins and lush fruit. I love them both!

**Clos Du Val also produces the Estate Merlot Block 6 Carneros (\$60). How does that compare with your other merlot?**

The Block 6 Merlot is from our Gran Val Vineyard in Carneros, which we have farmed since 1973. The climate in Carneros is cooler than at our Hironnelle Estate Vineyard in the Stags Leap District. Because it can ripen earlier than cabernet, merlot is one of the Bordeaux grapes that really excels in Carneros.

The cooler climate provides for longer hangtime for the fruit, which allows these beautiful, intense flavors to develop in the grapes. Because Carneros is cooler than Stags Leap, in very broad strokes, the result is a merlot that is bright and fresh with good acidity and more red

fruit flavors, whereas our Stags Leap District Merlots are lusher, with softer tannins and more dark fruit layers.

### **How many acres of merlot grapes does Clos Du Val have planted?**

At Hironnelle, we have 10 acres of merlot out of a total of 126 planted acres. At Gran Val, we have 17 acres of merlot out of 135 planted acres.

### **What do consumers need to know to find high-quality merlots on par with yours?**

While merlot often has soft tannins and lovely fruit, the great ones also have depth, structure and complexity. For too long, too many of the merlots out there were lacking these qualities.

But if there has been a benefit to the criticism of merlot over the past decade, it has helped sort out the pretenders from the contenders. Wineries like Clos Du Val — that are really committed to making an exceptional merlot, grown in the right regions and climate, with proper yields, and high-quality winemaking techniques — are making phenomenal wines.

### **What does this year's harvest for merlot and other grapes look like at this point?**

This year's merlot is looking great. The fruit set was excellent, meaning that a high percentage of the flowers were pollinated and turned into grapes. The canopy on our estate merlot vines is full and well balanced, and we expect an average-size crop, which is ideal. While Mother Nature can always be expected to throw a few curveballs, at this early stage, we love what we are seeing with the 2016 growing season, both for merlot and our other grapes.

<http://wisconsinjournal.com/2016/07/14/magnificent-merlot-clos-du-val-produces-some-of-the-best/>