

Mastering Misinterpreted Merlot

The Masters of Merlot seminar, held Nov. 1 at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa, Calif., brought together a panel of experts to discuss the nuances of the grape variety and the importance of educating the consumer.

"In my roles as a writer and educator I taste all sorts of wines with just about anyone who will listen," said the event's moderator Anthony Giglio. "Merlot often comes up in the context of, 'do you drink Merlot?' as if asking for approval. The answer, of course, is yes."

The panel included Ted Edwards, winemaker for Freemark Abbey Winery; P.J. Alviso, vice president of winegrowing for Duckhorn Vineyards; Cleo Pahlmeyer, president of Pahlmeyer and Chris Carpenter, winemaker for Mt. Brave & La Jota.

All agreed that Merlot is a "finicky" variety to grow. The vines can be over-vigorous; grapegrowers need to constantly monitor soil moisture and vine stress. The thin-skinned grape is often prone to rot and requires regular leaf management. Merlot is sensitive to extreme temperatures, with a tendency to shatter; growers must be aware of temperature fluctuations and respond appropriately.

According to California Department of Food and Agriculture's vineyard acreage reports, bearing acreage of Merlot hit a high of 51,570 acres in 2006 but fell to 48,648 in 2007. Acreage continued to decline in subsequent years and has remained flat at around 40,000.

Though California's Merlot plantings have decreased, the panelists agreed those plantings

are more purposeful and the winemaking is more mindful.

During the tasting, Edwards presented the Freemark Abbey 2015 Bosché Vineyard Merlot. Located up against the Mayacamas Mountains separating Napa and Sonoma counties, the Bosché Vineyard, according to Edwards, is an idyllic spot to grow Merlot. Situated along the Rutherford Bench, the area enjoys deep gravelly loam soils and a high water table during winter and spring.

Carpenter pointed out that in today's marketplace, wine consumers have many choices, and it's the lack of education about those choices that makes them miss out on a wine as significant as Merlot. "It's like expounding on the difference between blues and rock and why each form of music should have a showcase and a place in

your listening time," he said. "Merlot is the blues to Cabernet Sauvignon's rock, and to not experience it as its own expressive choice is to miss out on something that is as enjoyable as other 'noble' varieties are," he said.

According to a Wines Vines Analytics report based on data by the market research group IRI, Merlot was the only major varietal to see a sales decline falling 6% to \$563 million in the 52 weeks ending July 15.

But consumers could be seeking out higher quality Merlots from better sites as direct-to-consumer shipments of Merlot increased nearly 10% in the last 12 months ending in July. The total value of all Merlot shipments increased from \$65 million in the 12 months ending April 2017 to \$72 million in the same period ending April 2018. Merlot's average bottle price also increased from \$30.53 to \$32.46.

—Stacy Briscoe

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