

Wine Spectator

Merlot Magic

DUCKHORN LEADS THE WAY AS CALIFORNIA VINTNERS APPROACH THE GRAPE WITH NEW ENERGY

“Few California wineries are as strongly identified with a single varietal as Duckhorn is with Merlot. And that’s good news for fans of the grape: **Duckhorn is making some of the best bottlings in California today.**

Founded in 1976, Duckhorn has made Merlot from the start at its winery just north of St. Helena in Napa Valley.

One of the key sources for its success over the years has been the Three Palms Vineyard in the northern reaches of the valley. **Duckhorn’s 2014 Three Palms bottling is the highest-rated California Merlot of this report, scoring a classic 95 points on Wine Spectator’s 100-point scale (\$98).**

It is among 100 California Merlots and Merlot-based blends that I have blind-tasted in our Napa office over the past year. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

“Three Palms is the most structured Merlot we can make,” explains Duckhorn winemaker Renée Ary. “There’s a mindset that you can’t grow a Merlot vineyard in a warm climate, but Three Palms throws that out the window.”

Merlot is usually planted in cooler sites than its leading competitor for consumer attention, Cabernet Sauvignon, but Three Palms is in one of the warmest pockets in Napa Valley, situated near the town of Calistoga.

Ary credits the rocky soils of the site

with making the vines struggle, and therefore avoiding the overcropping that results in flaccid warm-climate Merlots. **The 2014 is a powerful and refined rendition, with concentrated red fruit, spice and mineral flavors.**

In May 2015, Duckhorn bought the vineyard from its longtime owners, the Upton family, from whom they had purchased grapes since Duckhorn’s first Three Palms Vineyard-designated bottling in 1978. Today, 50 of its 83 acres are planted to Merlot, with the rest to other Bordeaux varieties.

It is part of the 240 acres that Duckhorn owns in the valley overall, from which spring a bevy of highly rated Merlots, including the Stout Vineyard 2013 (94, \$98) and the Atlas Peak 2014 (93, \$75). The straight Napa Valley bottling (2014: 92, \$54) is notable for its sizable production (52,000 cases) as well as its quality, which gets a boost from the Three Palms fruit that makes up 22 percent of the cuvée.

The key to success at Three Palms, according to Ary, is to keep a sharp eye on the vineyard’s cultivation techniques, such as cutting lateral canes to reduce yields and thus concentrate the flavors. Also, Ary has ratcheted down the oak treatment: Formerly, at least 95 percent of the wine was aged in new French oak, whereas that figure is now down to 75 percent in order to better allow the fruit components to shine through.



Overall, the Merlot quality quotient is dominated by Napa wines. Of the 26 bottlings that scored 90 points or higher (“outstanding” on Wine Spectator’s scale), all but three are from the valley. Among varietal Merlots, the top-rated Napa bottlings from Hall and Rombauer accentuate Merlot’s suppleness while illustrating two styles common in California today...”

For the full article pick up a copy of the November 30th, 2017 issue of Wine Spectator.

Recommended Merlots From California

One hundred wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/113017. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
DUCKHORN Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2014 This powerful red offers concentrated flavors of red plum, cherry and boysenberry that are layered with rich spice and mineral accents.	95	\$98
DUCKHORN Merlot Napa Valley Stout Vineyard 2013 Intense and structured, with cherry, plum tart and dried raspberry flavors filled with a refined minerality, gliding across the palate.	94	\$98
DUCKHORN Merlot Atlas Peak 2014 Svelte and savory, with engaging notes of slate and hot stone to the dried red fruit flavors, showing hints of cedar and juniper berry.	93	\$75
POTT La Carte et Le Territoire Young Inglewood Vineyard St. Helena 2014 Precise, with expressive rose petal and black raspberry aromas that lead to rich, structured flavors of currant, licorice and fresh pepper.	93	\$125
DUCKHORN Merlot Napa Valley 2014 Plush and rich-tasting, with finely interwoven flavors of dark cherry, plum tart and blackberry accented by cocoa powder notes.	92	\$54
HALL Merlot Napa Valley 2014 This plush red is full of richly spiced flavors of dark cherry, blackberry and plum tart, supported by elegant, medium-grained tannins.	92	\$40
JEMROSE Merlot Bennett Valley Gloria's Gem 2014 A well-knit backbone of mineral tannins and lively acidity lends structure to the rich and complex notes of currant and raspberry.	92	\$50
RAMEY Template Napa Valley 2014 Dense and rich, with an array of powerful violet, plum tart and dried berry flavors that are backed by lively acidity. Merlot blend.	92	\$85
SHAFER TD-9 Napa Valley 2015 Powerful and finely textured, showing concentrated dried cherry, dark currant and roasted plum flavors, with lively minerality. Merlot blend.	92	\$60
AMUSE BOUCHE Napa Valley 2014 Elegantly structured, with red currant and wildflower aromas and raspberry, tomato leaf and olive flavors. Merlot and Cabernet Franc.	91	\$225
CARTER Hossfeld Coliseum Napa Valley 2014 Well-sculpted, with raspberry and spiced cherry flavors that show red licorice and white pepper notes. Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.	91	\$85
COUP DE FOU DRE Le Droitier Right-Bank Blend Napa Valley 2014 Raspberry ganache and cherry tart flavors fill this full-bodied red, which is ripe and plush midpalate. Merlot blend.	91	\$150
MERRYVALE Merlot Napa Valley 2015 Plush and spicy, with cola accents to the roasted plum and cherry tart flavors. Cedar and rich spice notes linger on the finish.	91	\$48
PAHLMAYER Merlot Napa Valley 2014 There are lots of tarry notes in this big, strapping red, which features roasted plum and dark currant flavors.	91	\$85
ROMBAUER Merlot Napa Valley 2014 Rich and ripe, this is full of powerful Christmas pudding, dark cherry and black currant flavors, backed by muscular acidity and tannins.	91	\$45
SWITCHBACK RIDGE Merlot Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard 2014 Dense and a touch brooding, with plenty of sanguinity to the dark plum, black currant and dried blackberry flavors.	91	\$58

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
OBERON Merlot Napa Valley 2015 Robust, with inky notes to the dark currant, dried sage and fig flavors that glide across the palate. The sanguine finish is richly spiced.	90	\$23
KENDALL-JACKSON Merlot Sonoma County Vintner's Reserve 2014 There's good cut to this mineral red, which features luscious raspberry, dark plum and blackberry flavors. Well-structured, with a spicy finish.	89	\$24
NAPA CELLARS Merlot Napa Valley 2014 Well-framed, with light smoky notes accenting the dried plum and cherry flavors. Savory accents fill the fresh, mineral finish.	89	\$24
ST. FRANCIS Claret Sonoma County 2014 This rich version shows plush, mocha-infused flavors of dark plum and blackberry, framed by firm tannins. Merlot blend.	89	\$22
ST. FRANCIS Merlot Sonoma Valley 2014 Svelte, with medium-grained tannins behind the plush raspberry tart and red plum flavors. Chocolate and spice details show on the finish.	89	\$22
FABIO VIVIANI Fatty Pope Paso Robles 2014 Offers concentrated flavors of plum tart, rose petal and boysenberry, with svelte tannins. Fresh and juicy on the finish. Merlot blend.	89	\$20
DECOY Merlot Sonoma County 2015 Notes of hot stone and mulled berry show in this full-bodied red, with dried green herb and forest floor accents emerging on the finish.	88	\$25
GOLDSCHMIDT Fidelity Nick Goldschmidt Crazy Creek Estate Alexander Valley 2015 There's subtle complexity to the dense dark currant and raspberry flavors, accented by dried green herbs, with a crisp finish. Merlot.	88	\$16
KIRKLAND SIGNATURE Meritage Napa Valley 2015 A lithe and sinewy red, with notes of slate to the roasted plum, berry and shiso leaf flavors. Merlot blend.	88	\$14
PARDUCCI Merlot Mendocino County Small Lot 2014 Mineral and slate notes abound in this tannic red, which has generous flavors of dark currant, olive and dried beef.	88	\$13
PURPLE HEART Napa Valley 2014 A lively, user-friendly red, with appealing notes of red currant and tomato leaf. Merlot blend.	88	\$20
TOAD HOLLOW Merlot Sonoma County Richard McDowell's Selection 2015 A firm and fleshy red, with engaging minerality to the dark fruit and Asian spice flavors, followed by cedary accents on the finish.	88	\$16
EDNA VALLEY Merlot Central Coast 2015 Plum sauce and dried berry flavors mix easily in this open-textured and spicy red. Dried green herb notes show on the finish.	87	\$14
CHATEAU SOUVERAIN Merlot California 2014 This straightforward and appealing version offers savory cherry and spiced herb flavors.	86	\$13
FETZER Merlot California Eagle Peak 2015 Ripe, with plenty of mocha and smoky notes to the roasted plum flavors. Green herbal accents show on the finish.	85	\$10
RED ROCK Merlot California Reserve 2015 Flavors of green olive and dried red berries dominate this savory style, with notes of coffee bean on the finish.	85	\$14