

Robb Report

The 13 Best New Merlots to Buy Right Now

We're not even going to mention that one movie.

MARCH 8, 2021 By [SARA L. SCHNEIDER](#)

Never mind that one of the world's most expensive wines—[Pomerol's Pétrus](#), whose 100-point 2015 can be found right now for a [cool \\$3,800](#)—is made of [Merlot](#), the Bordeaux variety struggles for equality with Cabernet Sauvignon in the eyes of many Americans. Recent tastings of many of the West Coast's best bottles, though, have convinced me all over again that the “little sister” reputation trailing Merlot is just wrong.

Gilles Nicault, director of winemaking and viticulture for the Long Shadows collection of wines in Washington, appears to agree: “I love Merlot's beautiful texture and expression of fruit, from dark berries to earthiness and graphite and how it all integrates with new French oak that creates layers and structure.” Born and trained in France, Nicault, who makes the [Long Shadows Pedestal Merlot](#) in partnership with famed French winemaking consultant Michel Rolland, believes the grape captures a special sense of place on the West Coast (sorry, Pétrus)—“not as much of the graphite profile we find in Bordeaux, but the dark fruit is enhanced by a beautiful richness in the mouth.”

In fact, no collection of West Coast [Merlot](#) recommendations would be worth its salt without a healthy representation from Washington state, where the variety shows gravitas, a pure fruit character and robust tannin structure that can send Cabernet packing. (Winemakers there allegedly splash a little Cab into their Merlot to soften it up on occasion!) Nicault describes the balance created by Washington's growing season, especially toward harvest. “Warm days ripen the phenols, increasing the concentration of the color and the overall intensity,” he says, “while the cool nights preserve its vibrancy and acidity.”

From both California and [Washington](#), these 13 bottles vary widely in style—offering something for everyone—but they play second fiddle to none in combining exciting textures, gorgeous fruit and impressive structure.

Abeja 2018 Merlot Columbia Valley, Washington



Photo: Courtesy of Abeja

This lush Merlot from [Abeja](#) offers huge rewards. Damp earth and warm spice on the nose are joined by licorice and mocha. Plush and silky dark cherry fruit push the palate toward sweetness, with ripe tannins aiding the effort. But savory hints of black pepper and umami come into play to balance the sweetness through a long, rich finish.

BUY NOW: \$50

Beringer 2017 Bancroft Ranch Vineyard Merlot Howell Mountain, Napa Valley



Photo: Courtesy of Beringer Single Vineyard

This rich but vibrant mountain Merlot from [Beringer](#) promises it will open up beautifully with a few years in the cellar. Firm tannins carry sweet cherry fruit, cassis, mocha, hillside herbs and warm baking spices, with savory crushed rock adding underlying minerality.

BUY NOW: \$90

Bouchaine 2018 Hyde Vineyard Merlot Carneros, Napa Valley



Photo: Courtesy of Hyde Vineyard

This bright, medium-bodied red from [Bouchaine](#) is for those who like their Merlot fresh and edgy as opposed to gob-smacked with ripe fruit. Sourced from a block in neighboring Hyde Vineyard that was planted in 1986, the wine opens with damp loam that speaks of the 35-year-old vines. Dark cherry aromas are interwoven with cloves, anise and fresh bay leaf notes, while the juicy palate dances with acidity that carries a gamut of berries against savory tannins and lovely tension. A cool-climate beauty.

BUY NOW: \$90

The Cowgirl and the Pilot 2017 Merlot Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley



Photo: Courtesy of Trefethen

This elegant Merlot is the Trefethen Family's tribute to founders John and Janet Trefethen—a former navy pilot and California rodeo queen, respectively—who in 1973 fell in love in the valley and went on to help cornerstone the industry there with their namesake winery. Lovely fragrant purple flower aromas open (10% Cabernet Franc talking), mixing with perfumed berries and cocoa. Silky tannin textures in the mouth, carrying buckets of cherry, berry and plum flavors edged with crushed fresh herbs, add to the considerable yum factor. This one is elegant, long and superbly balanced.

BUY NOW: \$90

Duckhorn Vineyards 2017 Three Palms Vineyard Merlot Napa Valley



Photo: Three Palms Vineyard

Since [Duckhorn](#) first made a Merlot from the iconic Three Palms Vineyard, in 1978, the wine has become something of a benchmark for the variety in California. And even in a slightly difficult year like 2017, this is a beautiful sip. Earthy aromas mingle with mint and dried tobacco under spicy cherry, cedar and faint blossoms. Plush and concentrated fruit—red cherry and darker black raspberry—pops over fleshy tannins on the palate, with an intriguing minerality on the edge.

BUY NOW: \$110

J. Lohr 2018 Creston Vineyard Merlot El Pomar District, Paso Robles



Photo: Courtesy of Creston Vineyard

From Paso Robles icon [J. Lohr](#) comes an elegant wine for the price. In generally warm Paso, Creston Vineyard is a cooler spot, and this vibrant Merlot is juicy with the acidity that fact allows. Delicate florals, graphite and wet stone open on the nose, joined by red currant and black tea notes. Lovely red fruit dances across the palate—black raspberry and pomegranate—with tannins that are subtle in their finesse.

BUY NOW: \$40

J.O. Sullivan 2018 Founder's Reserve Merlot Rutherford, Napa Valley



Photo: Courtesy of J.O. Sullivan Merlot

Look no further for a serious Merlot than this Founder's Reserve from [Sullivan Rutherford Estate](#). The aromas speak of the earth, with that legendary Rutherford Dust quality leading into graphite, tobacco leaf, cedar, mint, florals and mocha. The palate follows through on complexity—generous red fruit is vibrant and textured, layered with crushed herbs and wet-stone minerality and backed by a significant tannin structure (an invitation to age this one).

BUY NOW: \$250

La Jota Vineyard Co. 2011 W.S. Keyes Vineyard Howell Mountain Estate Napa Valley



Photo: courtesy La Jota Vineyard Co.

This 10-year-old from the [La Jota](#) vineyard honoring Howell Mountain wine pioneer W.S. Keyes (he planted it in the late 1800s)—just re-released—is a delicious argument for aging great Merlot. Still fresh with bright fruit and acidity, it's offering complex layers of flavor and aromas now. Loam and pencil shavings are showing under berry liqueur and dark chocolate. Ripe but elegantly firm tannins give structure to spicy black raspberry and cherry, with mountain intensity carrying through a lingering finish.

BUY NOW: \$575 (FOR A 3-BOTTLE SET)

L'Ecole No. 41 2018 Estate Merlot, Walla Walla Valley



Photo: L'Ecole Vineyard

The latest estate Merlot from [L'Ecole](#)—a blend of fruit from Seven Hills and Ferguson Vineyards—might be the producer's best yet (and for this price, it's an amazing deal). Deep and complex aromas open, dark cherry layered with crushed herbs, violets and baking spices. The palate speaks of the vineyard(s), with lovely minerality underlying juicy berry and black cherry flavors and an impressive tannin structure. This one is taking itself seriously.

BUY NOW: \$36

Melka Estates 2015 Mekerra Knights Valley, Sonoma County



Photo: Courtesy of Melka Estates

This 100 percent Merlot from acclaimed wine consultant Philippe [Melka](#) and his wife, Cherie, shows the power of its mountain vineyard source, at 2,300 feet in Sonoma County. The nose conjures Cabernet, with dark fruit, gravelly minerality, resinous herbs and forest notes leading into a rich and complex palate. Plush, juicy plum, berry and cassis are undergirded by a firm tannin structure. The wine is ripe, but balanced by texture and tension. This one will age.

BUY NOW: \$145

Northstar 2017 Premier Merlot Columbia Valley, Washington



Photo: Northstar Winery

Here's a bold, full-throttle Merlot from Washington's [Northstar](#), which specializes in the variety. Spicy, woody and a little smoky upfront, aromas run to tobacco leaf and crushed herbs. The palate, though, unleashes intense fruit—cassis, berry, plum—and hangs on a firm tannin structure, deceptive in all its plushness and elegance.

BUY NOW: \$100

Pedestal 2017 Merlot Columbia Valley, Washington



Photo: Courtesy of Long Shadows

This opulent Merlot from Washington's [Long Shadows Vintners Collection](#) was overseen by one of the world's most sought-after wine consultants—Pomerol-based Michel Rolland—and shepherded on the ground by director of winemaking and viticulture, French-born Gilles Nicault. Soaring aromatics move from high-toned minerality, savory forest and fresh herbs to cassis, chocolate and warm spice. Generous and lively berry and plum flavors fill a broad palate textured by plush tannins.

BUY NOW: \$68