

Merlot is the juicy, rich red you'll want to drink during winter.

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Story by Peter Bourne

It seems like merlot is having a moment... Yes, indeed. Thoughtful winemaking and new clones are the key drivers of the current wave of this polished red. **What are clones?** A clone is a variant of a grape variety that has the same DNA but differs in flavour and physical properties. Australia's merlot vines date back to the 1960s but the quality back then was poor, thanks in large part to the D3V14 clone. Today, new French, Italian and Argentinian clones are bringing depth, character and complexity to modern merlot. **Where does merlot come from?** It's the most planted grape in Bordeaux, France, where it's generally blended with cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot and sometimes malbec. Château Petrus is pure merlot and one of the most expensive Bordeaux reds (more than \$10,000 a pop). Australia has 8500 hectares planted, which is nearly 10 per cent of our red grapes. **What does it taste like?** It has dark cherry, plum and boysenberry flavours, with hints of cinnamon and clove, and soft tannins. It's a medium-bodied red that flowers later and ripens early, making it a "fail safe" blending component in cool seasons. **Is that why there are lots of cabernet sauvignon and merlot blends here?** Yes, it's a classic pairing; the cabernet gives structure to merlot's lush flavours. **What food does it pair best with?** Lamb and gutsy vegetarian dishes, such as kidney bean lasagne or lentils. The wine's supple tannins can work with spice so curries are good, too. **And the names to know?** From Orange in NSW there's Bloodwood Merlot Noir, Philip Shaw The Conductor and De Salis M. In South Australia, Jim Irvine has championed merlot in the Eden Valley for over 40 years; consider his high-end Grand Merlot or the more affordable 2021 Irvine Altitude. Economical drops include Grant Burge Hillcot, Taylors and Shottesbrooke from McLaren Vale. 🍷

Moss Wood Ribbon Vale Merlot

Moss Wood may be known for cabernet sauvignon but the label's merlot also stands tall. Tightly structured with drive and concentration, it has ample red fruits and a fine frame of tannins. For maximum flavour, it needs cellar time or decanting.

2022 / Margaret River, WA / \$87

Trentham Estate Merlot

The Murphy brothers craft amazing wines at affordable prices, with their 2022 merlot scoring a gold medal at the 2024 Sydney Royal Wine Show. This vintage has aromas of ripe plum and cinnamon, a gently persuasive palate and a long, lively aftertaste.

2023 / Murray Darling, NSW / \$18

HoosEgg Mountain Dragon Merlot

Philip Shaw claims that merlot is the best red variety in Orange and his Mountain Dragon justifies the enthusiasm. It has a lush, plush, spicy nose backed by layers of mulberry and dark plum. Silken tannins elongate the finish.

2019 / Orange, NSW / \$118

Mérite Merlot

Colleen and Mike Miller are champions of the Wrattenbully region, which shares the same terra rosa as neighbouring Coonawarra. Five clones of merlot bring complexity to this concentrated, flavour-laden red, in which depth and intensity abound.

2018 / Wrattenbully, SA / \$75