



**MERLOT
REPORT
2017**

KEY FINDINGS

The first local varietal bottling of Merlot is credited to Stellenbosch property Overgaauw in 1982 and today it is our eighth most planted variety with some 5 500ha in the ground, roughly 6% of the national vineyard.

There are plenty of single-variety examples around but these are typically positioned as an easier version of Cabernet Sauvignon, which is to say a red wine offering the classic nobility of a Bordeaux grape but without the austere tannins. As a result, local Merlot often makes for less ambitious and less expensive wines than either straight Cab or Bordeaux-style red blends.

Of course, Merlot does achieve greatness as the predominant component in the wines of Pomerol and St-Émilion and the challenge for serious local producers is to emulate this success. Are they getting even close?

In the first in-depth look at the category for some time, the panel looked at 67 current-release examples and it must be said that wines of real distinction still seem to be somewhat elusive.

The most basic wines were at best light and fresh and at worst, sweet and simple. There is probably a place for such fare in the market place presuming that they don't breach R100 a bottle. However, it must be asked if varieties such as Cinsault or Pinotage are not destined to perform a better job when it comes to providing affordable everyday drinking?

The next observation to be made is that a lot of wines scored in the 86-89 bracket on the 100-point quality scale – 67% of the line-up to be precise with 86.4 being the average score overall – and it needs to be said once again that there is no shame in this. These wines are immensely appealing but typically lack that little bit extra complexity which would elevate them beyond the 90-point threshold.

What are the specific challenges facing the category? Supposedly, Merlot's crucial strengths are its smooth texture and sense of lushness while its shortcoming is a preponderance to deliver wines that are unduly green. Overt pyrazine character was an issue on some but certainly not all examples and once again, it's a matter of degree – a hint of fresh herbs on a wine can be quite winning while grassiness or overt mint less so.

As much of a problem if not more so were overdone wines. In an attempt to achieve weight and depth, some winemakers seem to pick as late as possible, work the grapes really hard and then apply an overly ambitious barrel regime – the result is wines that come across as sweet and syrupy, over-extraction lending a drying quality to the finish and clumsy oaking providing untoward aromas and flavours. A "chocolate" character is perhaps useful for wines positioned towards the bottom end of the market but it shouldn't be used as a signifier for "expensive" ...

The flip-side of these overdone wines was winemakers pursuing elegance only to land up with something a little weedy, slight or puny. Pick earlier to keep alcohols down and retain freshness and green-ness almost inevitably creeps in. Optimal ripeness and proper balance when it comes to Merlot appears to be more of a challenge under local conditions than just about any other variety.

There were also a couple of wines where a lack of winemaking precision compromised the end-result: some wines showed excessive reduction while others showed excessive oxidation. In addition, there were wines where acid additions had not been handled well, the sense here being that winemakers were unsuccessfully attempting to re-introduce freshness to wines made from super-ripe grapes. Another point to be made is that no less than seven wines entered were from the 2016 vintage, some of these wines so primary as to appear unfinished!

What of the five wines to score 90-plus? Perhaps their hallmark was that they had a concentration about them that the other wines lacked. It would appear that Merlot is particularly unforgiving of unsuitable soils and climates and requires the most meticulous viticulture if success with the variety is to be had. Just to keep the panel honest, the modestly priced but much acclaimed La Chenade 2014 from Lalande de Pomerol and as made by Denis Durantou of Église-Clinet was included as a ringer. Not unexpectedly, it was the sixth wine to score 90-plus...

JUDGING PROCEDURES

67 entries were received from 50 producers. The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consisted of two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens and James Pietersen, both of Wine Cellar, Cape Town merchants and cellarers of fine wine. We tasted blind, ratings done according to the 100-point system. Final scores were awarded on the basis of discussion that involved retasting where necessary rather than relying solely on arithmetic averaging.

Christian Eedes,
Editor, Winemag.co.za

TASTING NOTES

92

Boschendal 1685 2015

Price: R110

Total production: 26 598 bottles

Abv: 14%

Matured for 12 months in French oak, 20% new. A pretty nose displaying red and black berries, flowers and dried herbs plus attractive oak. The palate is complex and balanced – fruit that is juicy and sweet in the best sense, while the acidity is fresh and tannins fine, the finish long and savoury. A particularly refined execution.

92

Org de Rac 2015

Price: R64

Total production: 9 900 bottles

Abv: 14.39%

Matured for 13 months in French oak, 100% new. Initially shy on the nose but opens up to reveal red and black berries, some olive, fresh herbs plus spice and toasty oak. Sweet, rich and properly ripe on the palate – good depth and breadth of fruit plus bright acidity before a savoury finish.

91

La Chenade 2014 Lalande de Pomerol

Wine Cellar price: R295

Total production: 18 000 bottles

Abv: 13.5%

80% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc. Red and black berries, floral perfume and some leafiness plus vanilla and spice. Rich and full with lovely fruit density, fresh acidity and smooth tannins.

90

Delaire Graff 2014

Price: R295

Total production: 5 000 bottles

Abv: 14.7%

Matured for 16 months in French oak, 80% new. Red and black berries plus and attractive herbal edge. Good fruit purity, fresh acidity and well-judged oak. Rich and smooth textured.

90

Lourensford Limited Release 2015

Price: R300

Total production: 1 700 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 18 months in 300-litre French oak barrels, 84% new. Red and black fruit plus a certain olive-like quality and attractive oak. Rich and full but balanced – good fruit definition and fresh acidity, the finish long and savoury.

90

Shannon Woolworths 2015

Price: R159.95

Total production: 7 289 bottles

Abv: 14%

Matured for nine months in fourth- and fifth-fill French oak. Very aromatic on the nose with notes of red and black fruit, olive, flowers and fresh herbs. Super-rich and dense on the palate but balanced thanks to fresh acidity, the finish long and savoury.

89

Buitenverwachting 2012

Price: R160

Total production: 20 700 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 22 months in French oak barrels, a combination of first-, second-, and third-fill. Dark fruit, olive, a certain leafiness and some earthiness. Rich and full with a not unattractive sweet 'n sour quality, the finish long and savoury.

89

Groenland Premium 2015

Price: R140

Total production: 2 300 bottles

Abv: 14.61%

Matured for 12 months in French oak, 100% new. Dark fruit, some herbal character and toasty oak. Rich and full with smooth tannins, the finish long and savoury.

89

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2014

Price: R115

Total production: 29 520 bottles

Abv: 14.16%

Matured for 14 to 16 months in French oak, 40% new. Black berries, some olive and an attractive herbal edge to the nose. The palate displays sumptuous fruit, fresh acidity and smooth tannins – carefully crafted.

89

Overgaauw 2015

Price: R130

Total production: 20 000 bottles

Abv: 14%

Matured for 18 months in French oak, 30% new. A perfumed nose showing red berries and an attractive herbal edge. The palate is medium bodied with pure fruit, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. Commendable for its elegance.

89

Whalehaven 2013

Price: R183

Total production: 5 400 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 14 months in French oak, a third new. A herbal top note before red and black berries and some attractive oak character on the nose. The palate is rich and round with plenty of upfront sweet fruit and soft tannins.

89

Yonder Hill 2014

Price: R190

Total production: 3 900 bottles

Abv: 13.95%

Matured for 18 months in French oak, 65% new. The nose shows red and black berries with some fresh herbs in the background. Medium bodied and nicely structured – pure fruit, fresh acidity and a lovely latticework of tannins. Relatively lean but nicely focused.

COMPLETE SCORES A – Z

Name	Wine of Origin	Score
Almenkerk 2013	Elgin	86
Alvi's Drift Signature 2016	Worcester	79
Asara Vineyard Collection 2014	Stellenbosch	88
Barton 2015	Walker Bay	86
Bein 2015	Stellenbosch	86
Bein Little 2016	Stellenbosch	87
Bein Reserve 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Bonnievale 2016	Bonnievale	84
Boschendal 1685 2015	Western Cape	92
Buitenverwachting 2012	Constantia	89
Creation 2016	Walker Bay	81
Creation Reserve 2015	Walker Bay	87
De Helderberger 2015	Stellenbosch	85
De Trafford 2012	Stellenbosch	84
Delaire Graff 2014	Stellenbosch	90
Eagles' Nest 2014	Constantia	85
Eikendal 2014	Stellenbosch	87
Eikendal 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Ernie Els 2015	Stellenbosch	86
Glenelly Glass Collection 2015	Stellenbosch	86
GlenWood 2016	Franschhoek	84
Groenland Premium 2015	Bottelary- Stellenbosch	89
Groot Constantia 2014	Constantia	87
Groot Constantia 2015	Constantia	86
Groote Post 2015	Darling	86
Hartenberg 2015	Stellenbosch	87
Hermanuspietersfontein Posmeester 2015	Western Cape	87
Holden Manz 2013	Franschhoek	88
Idiom 900 Series 2012	Stellenbosch	73
Jason's Hill 2015	Breedekloof	88
Jordan Black Magic 2014	Stellenbosch	88
Kings Kloof 2014	Stellenbosch	87
Klein Doolhof 2012	Wellington	83
Klein Doolhof 2013	Wellington	86
Kloovenburg 2015	Swartland	87
Knorhoek 2015	Stellenbosch	87
KWV Cathedral Cellar 2014	Western Cape	89
La Bri 2015	Franschhoek	84
La Chenade 2014	Lalande de Pomerol	91
Laibach Claypot 2015	Simonsberg- Stellenbosch	83

Laibach Woolworths Organic The Ladybird 2016	Western Cape	87
Lanzerac 2015	Stellenbosch	86
Longridge 2014	Stellenbosch	87
Lourensford 2014	Stellenbosch	86
Lourensford Limited Release 2015	Stellenbosch	90
Marianne 2013	Simonsberg-Paarl	88
Namaqua 2015	Olifants River	83
Namaqua Cellar Door 2014	Olifants River	80
Oldenburg Vineyards 2013	Stellenbosch	85
Org de Rac 2015	Swartland	92
Org de Rac Reserve 2014	Swartland	88
Org de Rac Reserve 2015	Swartland	87
Overgaauw 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Remhoogte Aspect 2014	Stellenbosch	86
Romond Rebus 2012	Stellenbosch	88
Shannon Mount Bullet 2014	Elgin	88
Shannon Woolworths 2015	Elgin	90
Shannon Woolworths 2016	Elgin	85
Steenberg 2014	Constantia	86
Steenberg 2015	Constantia	87
Thelema 2014	Stellenbosch	84
Thelema Reserve 2013	Stellenbosch	88
Uva Mira The Mira 2014	Stellenbosch	87
Whalehaven 2013	Coastal Region	89
Whalehaven 2014	Coastal Region	87
Yonder Hill 2013	Stellenbosch	84
Yonder Hill 2014	Stellenbosch	89
Zorgvliet 2015	Banghoek	88