

# Wine Spectator

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## 12 California Merlots

**A dozen wines that show the elegance and supple texture the Merlot grape can attain in the Golden State**

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Merlot remains a best seller even though it isn't easy to make great Merlot in California, but as this week's group of new releases demonstrates, some wineries just have a knack for it. Excellence, however, comes at a price—most of these wines are \$30 or higher.

Topping the list is the Coho Napa Valley Michael Black Vineyard 2006. Located in the Coombsville area east of the town of Napa, Michael Black Vineyard has a southeast exposure on a hillside with rocky, volcanic soils, giving winemakers Brooks Painter and Gary Lipp rich and deeply structured fruit.

Winemaker Michael Hirby produced another winner with his Merlot-based blend, Realm The Tempest Napa Valley 2006. Blending grapes from Yountville, St. Helena and Pope Valley, he aged the 2006 in 100 percent new French oak.

The Switchback Ridge Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard has consistently been among our favorite Merlots, and the 2006 is no exception. The Peterson family has been farming their Calistoga ranch since 1914 and began planting grapes about 20 years ago, making wine under the guidance of Bob Foley.

One of the reasons we like good Merlot is its elegant and supple texture, and winemaker Heidi Barrett again shows she has a flair for that style with the Amuse Bouche Napa Valley 2007. Barrett blended in 7 percent Cabernet Franc with Merlot to make the blend.

**COHO Merlot Napa Valley Michael Black Vineyard 2006 Score: 93 | \$65**

Richly structured yet dense and complex. Offers appealing aromas of red currant, thyme and pencil lead, with layered black cherry and toasty mocha-oak flavors that deftly balance bold fruit and firm tannins. Drink now through 2015. 315 cases made. —*T.F.*

**REALM The Tempest Napa Valley 2006 Score: 92 | \$75**

Big, expressive and ripe, with a complex core of fruit. Aromas of red currant, toasty vanilla and spice with layers of intense blackberry, roasted herb and mocha flavors that build to dense, dry tannins. Merlot, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Best from 2011 through 2015. 213 cases made. —*T.F.*

**SWITCHBACK RIDGE Merlot Napa Valley Peterson Family Vineyard 2006 Score: 92 | \$56**

Sleekly structured yet builds in intensity. Offers aromas of currant and mocha and rich, layered flavors of black cherry, exotic spice and toasty oak. Drink now through 2014. 948 cases made. —*T.F.*

**AMUSE BOUCHE Napa Valley 2007 Score: 91 | \$200**

Supple and beautifully layered, with black cherry and toasty vanilla aromas and currant, spice and roasted sage flavors



Gary Lipp

*From Napa Valley's Coho comes a dense and complex 2006 Merlot.*

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that start delicately and then build to a rich, ripely tannic finish. Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Drink now through 2015. 500 cases made. —*T.F.*

**BRAVANTE Trio Howell Mountain 2006 Score: 90 | \$42**

Richly structured yet tightly wound at the core. Offers floral, toasty mocha and blackberry aromas, with layered currant, loamy mineral and roasted herb flavors. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Best from 2011 through 2016. 550 cases made. —*T.F.*

**CHAPPELLET Merlot Napa Valley 2006 Score: 90 | \$30**

Supple yet complex, with red currant, cedar and spicy-mocha aromas and rich black cherry and bell pepper flavors that linger with soft tannins. Drink now through 2013. 3,875 cases made. —*T.F.*

**EHLERS ESTATE Merlot St. Helena 2006 Score: 89 | \$45**

Ripe and a little showy, with seductive red currant and toasty oak aromas and soft black cherry, spice and mocha flavors. Drink now through 2014. 2,132 cases made. —*T.F.*

**SWANSON Merlot Oakville 2006 Score: 89 | \$36**

Supple yet well-structured, with black cherry and toasty oak aromas and sleek red currant, cedar and spice flavors that delicately gain complexity. Drink now through 2014. 8,400 cases made. —*T.F.*

**BRAVANTE Merlot Howell Mountain 2006 Score: 88 | \$42**

A soft and supple texture masks a nicely structured core of red currant, espresso and loamy earth flavors. Appealing black cherry and spice aromas. Drink now through 2013. 330 cases made. —*T.F.*

**ROBERT MONDAVI Merlot Napa Valley 2006 Score: 88 | \$23**

Offers an appealing blend of structure and plushness, with currant and espresso aromas and black cherry and anise flavors. Drink now through 2014. 29,912 cases made. —*T.F.*

**ST. FRANCIS Merlot Sonoma County Wild Oak 2005 Score: 88 | \$35**

Shows good structure and focus, with plum and pencil lead aromas and sleek black currant, cedar and spicy dill flavors. Drink now through 2014. 2,300 cases made. —*T.F.*

**ST. FRANCIS Red Sonoma County 2006 Score: 87 | \$12**

Refined and easy to drink, with red currant and toasty dill aromas and sleek cherry, bittersweet chocolate and spice flavors. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Zinfandel. Drink now through 2012. 60,000 cases made. —*T.F.*