



FRATELLI PERATA WINERY 1999 MERLOT, ESTATE

Merlot is a great example of current grape growing/winemaking in California today. In its earliest days, it was regarded as only a blending grape, widely thought to soften a young Cabernet Sauvignon. It was not widely planted. But locations of the early plantings were across the board, with little regard to the requirements of the grape. Hey, it's just a plant, anyway. It'll grow anywhere.

Microclimate, microclimate, microclimate. Vines will grow anywhere, but for the *grapes* to be what Fratelli Perata wants to work with, that's different. Our point of view is of an artist working to produce a wine of lasting memory. We are not just another winery cranking out more alcohol. This is our whole lifestyle, for past generations, this generation, and now, with Catherine at U.C.Davis, future generations. So what begins in the vineyard does matter.

Ah, Merlot. It is similar to Cabernet Sauvignon in flavor structure and vine requirements. The grape clusters are a tad larger, the berries somewhat larger. It doesn't like high temperatures and hot nights, but it can't grow in too cool an area or it won't develop mature flavors. It is susceptible to shot berries, so harvests can vary widely, year to year.

When made with ripe fruit grown in a not overly hot climate, Merlot can be excellent. It can also be the, "I'll have a glass of, uhm, Merlot, darling," that is quickly, and easily consumed and forgotten while conversations are light and similarly forgotten.

With consumers moving from White Zinfandel to Merlot, the 1990's saw a skyrocketing of Merlot planting, production, and prices. It is hard for a grape grower to produce excellent Merlot when prices are phenomenal, and wineries want to pump out enough Merlot to keep up with demand. Turn on the water! More! We need more! More often than not, the consumer got Merlot, technically Merlot, but not wonderful Merlot.

Meanwhile, the Aussies were at work. The best place in the world for Shiraz is in Paso Robles, they said. Why don't you have Shiraz here in Paso Robles? People love it. And, or course, they were right. Not only do people love it, wineries love making it, and it does really well here in Paso Robles. The buzz was on.

Merlot is now overplanted. The wineries aren't buying grapes from vineyards that produce 10 tons/acre just to make \$20,000/acre. They are being more select about location of vineyard, vine age, tonnage, everything that should have been on the table all along. Now, if you want to sell Merlot, it had better be really good.

We just like to make wines that are all the variety has to offer. Our west of Highway 101, southwest of the town of Paso Robles, along the cool Pacific Ocean air corridor gives us an excellent location for a vineyard. The temperatures get very warm during the growing season, but start cooling off around 2 PM to 40 to 50 degrees cooler than the highest daytime temperature. The hillsides contribute to good sun exposure, plus good water drainage. We are not greedy, making the vines overproduce.

Our first Merlot vintage was 1987, the year the winery started. Good enough for us, a few customers who found our tiny winery, and for local wineries to purchase our excess grapes. Our first wine entered in a wine competition was the 1990 Merlot, gold medal, Pomona (LA) Fair. Thinking it was a Petrus slipped in to test the judges' palate, we were audited. Who were these people in Paso Robles? Can a Merlot from Paso be this good?

After testing various cases and barrels of Merlot, they were satisfied and we were awarded the gold medal. Now this is what we're after: the "Aha! This is good!"

The 1999 vintage carries along a marvelous history. This year followed a very rainy 1998 (also a gold medal wine, by the way) setting the stage to allow the 1999 grapes to get fully ripe and dark. It was a very warm year, with very dry growing conditions. The grapes were harvested from October 2nd to October 10th. The average Brix was 24.47, and the average pH was 3.46. They were all ripe with good acidity.

As with all our wines, the ½ ton bins of grapes were dumped into the destemmer, with only the best clusters being crushed. The juice was fermented on the skins in 1-½ ton fermenting vats for 12 to 14 days. Each vat was punched down by hand at least 4 times per day to keep the juice in contact with the skins.

The new wine was pressed to only 1 bar of pressure, leaving damp pomace and bitter tannins behind. It was pumped to new American oak barrels, to age and become complex with oak elements. After the wine was racked several times over the course of 3 years, it was finally bottled on August 2, 2002.

It is deep. It is slow to awaken. Crafted in such a big style, it is demanding lots of bottle age. After extensive breathing, however, we know what's there: a Merlot that's bigger than many other winery's Cabernets. Long after this vintage is gone from other wineries, this wine is just being released. It demands respect. It needs its rest and will not be show off until ready. The time is now. Now and for the next ten years, this wine will evolve, will delight. It will remind you why Merlots were so wonderful before they were popular.

Our usual food with Merlot: Parmigiano Reggiano. Or consider grill. ed mushrooms, roasts in a cherry sauce, or spicy foods. It stands up to big flavors. It will for a long time to come.

There are lots of Merlot grapes growing in California, too many for the market to bear. There are very few really good Merlot wines. We think you will enjoy ours. And remember it.